

A Unique Vampire Story in This Issue

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#313

Weird Tales®

TANITH LEE
MELANIE TEM
IAN WATSON



Weird Tales



FOR SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS: THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE ISSN 0898-5073
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That Is Not Dead Which Can Eternal Lie . . .

We're ba . . . a . . . ck!

Welcome, just in time for our 75th anniversary, to the pages of *Weird Tales®*, The Unique Magazine, the greatest of all American pulp magazines, once home to H.P. Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith, Ray Bradbury, and even (believe it or not) Tennessee Williams. To fill you in briefly: Terminus Publishing Company revived *Weird Tales®* in 1988 and published nineteen issues, numbers 290 through 308, up until 1994. Then we lost our license when Hollywood came calling and offered *Weird Tales*, Ltd., the owners of the title, scads of money for use of the title in a television project. Quite sensibly, WT, Ltd., took the aforesaid scads. The television project, ultimately, failed to pan out. Now *Weird Tales®* returns as a DNA publication, in association with Terminus Publishing Co., Inc. We have been able to rent the title again and resume publication. Have we ever been away?

You will notice that this issue is numbered 313 and the last "official" issue was #308, so that implies that the four issues of *Worlds of Fantasy & Horror* count as *Weird Tales®*. For one thing, we find it enormously convenient to avoid renumbering everyone's subscriptions. But there's more to it than that.

When we lost our license back in 1994, we didn't want to quit. The obvious alternative was to think up another title which fit behind the big red W on the cover and keep on publishing, with continuity, so that the letter column in the first *Worlds of Fantasy & Horror* referred back to the previous *Weird Tales®*. But for the title on the cover and contents page, it was the same magazine. So, think of *Worlds of Fantasy & Horror* as *Weird Tales®*-in-exile, a means of keeping the magazine alive until we could get the title back.

What's in a name? If the name is *Spicy Oriental Zeppelin Stories*, maybe not very much, but *Weird Tales®* has, for most of this century, commanded respect. We can only promise you that we intend to continue with a magazine worthy of that name.

We have complete confidence in our new publisher, Warren Lapine, of DNA Publications, who is one of the most successful and capable fiction magazine publishers in the business. His science fiction magazine *Absolute Magnitude* and his vampire-fiction magazine *Dreams of Decadence* actually make money in a time when most magazine publishers are feeling a sense of doom and gloom, and, particularly, small-press horror magazines seem to be dying like may flies. We have joined Warren Lapine's stable and feel very comfortable there. Our future seems brighter than it has been in a long time. Quarterly publication of *Weird Tales®* will resume, as of this issue. You will continue to see stories by your favorites — and by bright new talents — in future issues. We have some on hand by S.P. Somtow, Tanith Lee, Nicholas DiChario, and quite a few others.

One other change: since George Scithers is no longer officially Publisher, he and Darrell Schweitzer share the position of Co-Editorship, and the "Editorial We" becomes, once again, a genuine plural.

Meanwhile, half of the aforesaid "We," Darrell, found ourselves, flattered, honored, and more than a little surprised by events at the 1997 World Horror Convention in Niagara Falls, New York. We attended in the capacity of Editor Guest of Honor and found the whole thing decidedly eye-opening —

Let's dispense with the formalities. This is Darrell here. The other guests of honor were writers Joe Lansdale, Poppy Z. Brite, and Ramsey Campbell, and artist Rick Berry. In such company the thought inevitably occurred to me that, after attending (by now) literally hundreds of other conventions in lesser roles, Maybe I Had Arrived.

But arrived at what? Conditions in the horror field have been so dire in the past few years that I was left wondering if there would be anything left to have a World Convention about.

"I have a feeling this may be either a pep rally — or a wake," I said before the affair. It was neither. It was more like a visit to an intensive care ward. Reports of the patient's demise may be a trifle

exaggerated, but Horror is, right now, on the critical list.

Let me say right away that it was a pleasant weekend, everyone was very nice, the Falls are as wet as ever (though the Americans turn them off at night) and the twin towns of Niagara Falls themselves (New York and Ontario) retain that subtle atmosphere of down-at-the-heels tackiness so reminiscent of a somewhat run-down section of the Atlantic City boardwalk plunked down in the middle of the continent.

It might best be summed up in the fun-house maze called Dracula's Haunted Castle on the Canadian side, which has an impressive exterior; loud, blaring speakers announcing the frightful delights within; and enormous, dripping fangs between which one walks to reach the entrance. But the inside is not quite as good — and scarcely more elaborate — than the "haunted house" you may have put together with your friends at Halloween when you were twelve.

In fact, the one the twelve-year-olds in my neighborhood put together, which scared the crap out of me when I was perhaps six, was considerably more imaginative. There was this girl dressed up as a witch in what might have been an old wedding gown. She *glowed* from the blue light behind her, and she offered me a jar of what I later realized were olives. "Reach in," she said in an alluring, spooky voice, "*and feel the eyes.*" At that point I ran out screaming.

And she didn't have to rely on a guy popping a paper bag behind your back to deliver the frights, which, I kid you not, the Niagara Falls Dracula castle did.

Delivering the frights is what the game is all about, and the impression I got at World Horror was that no one is delivering much of anything right now. The convention was notably lacking in professional activity, in stark contrast to the bustling World Fantasy Conventions, where authors, agents, editors, and publishers gather by the hundreds to make the deals that determine what you'll be reading for the next year or so. Representatives of the major New York publishers were conspicuously absent.

I try to convince myself that the Niagara Falls Dracula castle isn't quite the appropriate metaphor for the state of the horror field right now. And yet . . .

At the time of the convention, there was *no* "horror editor" at any publishing house in the United States. There was a time, ten or so years ago, when great quantities of black-covered, gold-embossed paperbacks with demon children or show-through drops of blood poured into the bookstores, when becoming a horror writer was actually a valid strategy for a beginning novelist who wanted to make a living. There was, admittedly, a flood of crud; but lots of good books got published too. The Dell Abyss line promised (and sometimes delivered) great things. The horror field gleamed with prosperity. Writers left fantasy or science fiction, hoping for greener pastures (and bigger paychecks) in the horror field. Editors gathered at conventions to court the writers. The writers gathered to court the editors. The New York publishing world spent lots of money on parties and promotional events.

That's all gone. At the Niagara Falls convention there was talk that A Certain Publisher Who Shall Remain Nameless was starting a horror line with the worst possible contracts and might get away with it, as the only game in town.

The great Empire has fallen; and the surviving writers, if lucky, will be serfs.

Take a look in the horror section at your local chain bookstore. It's a lot smaller. Once you take away the brand-name writers who don't *need* a category to make their books sell — King, Koontz, McCammon, Brite, Campbell — you'll discover that the whole section is filled by less than twenty writers, and some of those books are reprints, such as the recent Carroll & Graf edition of William Hope Hodgson's 1908 classic *The House on the Borderland*.

And what about magazines? There was a lot of talk about magazines at the World Horror Convention. What particularly threw me for a loop was that I found myself regarded as a hugely-successful, senior figure. What this turned out to mean was that *Worlds of Fantasy & Horror* (the Once and Future *Weird Tales*®) is one of *two* bookstore-distributed magazines in the field which has been around for more than a couple of years and has a circulation in four figures. (The other one is Richard Chizmar's *Cemetery Dance*.) The editors on the magazine panel with me spoke of 200-copy print-runs. Writers told how wonderful it was to get a whole cent a word for fiction, and how they'd take just copies if need be, to get published. (*Weird Tales*® and *Cemetery Dance* pay three cents a word and up.)

Now I had never seen ours as a large operation at all. But then I always saw us to be in the broader spectrum of fantastic-fiction magazines, along with *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, and *Interzone*. In that company, yes, we are one among many. In the context of what was being accounted as "the horror field" in Niagara Falls, I guess *WoF&H* must have seemed a titan. Or, to use an architectural metaphor, after all the skyscrapers and castles and gigantic temples have crumbled into dust, two modest little cabins in the back woods—ours and Richard Chizmar's — are the only things left standing, and therefore the most colossal edifices in the world. Perhaps the "field" is defined too narrowly.

I had another quite interesting conversation in Niagara Falls, with a fellow who ran a "horror" bookstore and boutique in California, one of those places where you can get, in addition to books and magazines, black t-shirts, skull jewelry, etc., etc.

The gentleman's store moved a lot of books and magazines, he said, particularly anything about vam-

pires. Would he want to carry *Worlds of Fantasy & Horror*? Well, no. It isn't "horror." But our title says "Horror," and the current issue's cover has a naked demoness popping out of an eyeball, and we publish Thomas Ligotti, Ramsey Campbell, David Schow, and any number of top horror names.

No, he explained. That's not "horror."

Well, by way of a thought experiment, I asked (knowing perfectly well where this was heading): Would his "horror" bookstore carry a book by Clark Ashton Smith, surely one of the most nighmarish writers of all time?

No. Smith has some "dark" elements, I was told, but isn't horror.

Well how about Edgar Allan Poe? Not "The Masque of the Red Death"? Probably not. I don't want to tell the bookstore owner his business. He knows better than I what he can and cannot move, but I think this is the heart of the problem: If we define "horror" as scary fiction (with no other emotional tones allowed) which exists *only* in a modern setting, perhaps only in a Generation-X frame of reference, and if a "horror magazine" is one which publishes such material, to the exclusion of all else, then the field is very small indeed. There *is* a very intense, very narrow audience for punk/Goth/vampire fiction, but this is — dare we say it? — a passing fad, likely to last no longer than the "psychedelic" science fiction of 1967, or a story Henry Kuttner did in the late 1930s about space explorers who landed on the Planet of the Jitterbugs.

An editorial policy of all modern-scene horror — and nothing else — is limiting, especially for a magazine. Of the stories in our last issue, Ian Watson's "My Vampire Cake" wouldn't exactly do because it's funny. The Tanith Lee and Darrell Schweitzer stories are not "horror" because they have imaginary settings. (Which was why the bookstore owner disqualified Clark Ashton Smith. The paradox is this: If the story's about a Vile, Rotting Thing from beyond the grave, and it's set in New Jersey in 1997, that's "horror." If it's about a Vile Rotting et cetera and set on the Earth's last continent in the far future, or in ancient Hyper-borea, that is "fantasy") The Dunsany and Shipley stories in recent issues don't quite make it either, leaving, at best, Ligotti's "Teatro Grottesco" and R. Chetwynd-Hayes's "The Chair." So, in the eyes of that California store owner, our magazine isn't "horror" enough for his clientele, and he may be right.

While we'd like to get our magazine into that California store, at the same time we have to stop and realize that there's been a severe winnowing out, and we're just about all that's left standing. We must be doing something right. This isn't the time for us to start emulating the losers.

Our magazine continues to be what it's always been. *Weird Tales®*, throughout its 75-year history, has presented a *range* of imaginative fiction, from Conan the Barbarian to H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos to the psychic-detective stories of Seabury Quinn. It found room for stories of childhood terrors by Ray Bradbury (most of the ones that make up his classic collection, *The October Country*.) and H. Rider Haggard-esque (or Indiana Jonesish) Lost Race novels by Edmond Hamilton. We intend the same, with a common denominator, which may be best expressed by a wonderful phrase, used by a correspondent several issues back, to describe the ideal *Weird Tales®* story: "ominous and magical."

Roll that phrase around in your mind. Balance both halves of it carefully. That's what the whole field needs. Magic. Imagination. The ability to get *out of* a completely mundane frame of reference. Fantastic horror.

Too much horror has no imaginative content at all anymore. There's only room for so many serial-killer books. If writers, booksellers, editors, and even readers start seeing horror only in terms of gore and crazy people with knives, then everyone will tire of it very quickly. By all indications, that's already happened. The field is wasteland. Dare we suggest that the public is bored with more and more imitations of fewer and fewer books?

Good horror attracts as much as it frightens. It does not *repel*. It is a careful balance of *wonder* and *terror* — as Fritz Leiber so well articulated in various essays, and practiced superbly in his fiction. It does not, Stephen King's disastrous advice to the contrary, "go for the gross-out," something which King himself, fortunately, doesn't do very often.

At the Convention, a small-press publisher was gleefully reading from a new novella which went for the gross-out as much as possible — in fact to a degree seldom seen in legally circulated literature.

Well, fine. This is all very amusing, even as small boys amuse themselves at camp with disgusting stories told in the dark. But that direction seems to me a dead end. It's a great way to sell about four hundred copies in an expensive, limited edition and no more.

Meanwhile, H.P. Lovecraft sells in the hundreds of thousands of copies, all over the world. I've since suggested another topic for a convention discussion: "What Can the Horror Field Learn from Lovecraft?"

What indeed? Lovecraft was around before the rise of "Modern Horror" and he's still there after its demise. So maybe he knew something too:

Wonder and terror, carefully balanced.

Now we (lapsing imperious once again) admit we're speaking from the position of a winner (or at least a survivor), but none of the foregoing is intended to suggest we're happy with the state of affairs. We note

with guarded optimism that horror books are still being published. As it was a couple decades ago, horror books now have to be slipped into other categories: mystery, science fiction, fantasy, and mainstream.

Bestsellers are bestsellers. King and Koontz still sell. They will continue to sell. Otherwise we suspect that horror fiction is going to have to hide out in the small presses for the next few years, until the buyers for the large bookstores forget just how badly all those horror paperbacks of the boom years sold. Then it will be time to start again, cautiously. We hope there will be more *Wonder* and less *Gross-Out* next time around.

More successful magazines will strengthen us all. One hopeful sign is *Wetbones*, a new magazine started by Paula Guran, who was at that World Fantasy Convention, with an attractive new issue, which, alas, hasn't had much distribution so far. (Our first impulse was to help. We carried copies back on the plane, to test-market in Philadelphia.) Send her a subscription. See her ad elsewhere in this issue.

We'd like to see other editors and publishers try. If newcomers would like a little advice from such an August and Senior Figures as Ourselves, it is this: Emphasize good writing. Keep the imaginative and fantastic content high. Use covers which suggest, not psychopathology, but fantasy. Design a magazine which would sell on the same shelf with *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, or even *Realms of Fantasy*, rather than one that looks like a small-press horror magazine of the kind that distributors won't touch. With a little camouflage, Horror can survive.

We Get Letters and not enough of them. However, we were pleased to hear from **Timothy Tucker**, who comments that the cover on #4 was "sort of a '90s update on Margaret Brundage," to which we suppose we'd agree, save that Douglas Beekman knows human anatomy far better than did the 1930s *Weird Tales* artist. Mr. Tucker continues:

S.T. Joshi's essay on child prodigies was very interesting, especially his harsh criticism of Poppy Z. Brite. It would be interesting to hear a response. This is my first exposure to Joshi's non-Lovecraftian criticism, but he shows himself to be just as astute here as he is in his massive Lovecraft biography.

It is hard to pick out one outstanding story this issue, because all of them were very fine indeed. Right now it appears to be a three-way tie for first among Tanith Lee's "The Sequence of Swords and Hearts," Thomas Ligotti's "Teatro Grottesco," and your own "The Sorcerer's Gift." Both your and Lee's stories successfully evoke a certain air of ancient myth and folklore. This air is one of the reasons I read fantastic fiction, because it is one of the few places left where such archetypes can be used. In addition, "The Sorcerer's Gift" is reminiscent of the works of one of my favorite authors, Clark Ashton Smith. I would gladly read more tales of Sekenre the Sorcerer, if you care to write them.

On the other hand, Ligotti's story is a fine example of updating the first-person-paranoid fiction style used by Poe and Lovecraft. The strange world of the Teatro definitely produces its share of mystery and chills. This issue seems to be a good one for tales in the style of Poe, because "The Chair" by R. Chetwynd-Hayes (is this a pseudonym?) is in the same vein, with a touch of the British ghost story thrown in. A fine effort.

To which we reply variously: No, the author's real name is R. Chetwynd-Hayes. The initial stands for Ronald. Mr. Chetwynd-Hayes is British, author of many published books, and recipient of a Bram Stoker Award for lifetime achievement.

You're quite right about the direct use of archetype in fantasy. That is one of its chief appeals, something which any successful writer in this field must understand, and be able to accomplish. As for Sekenre the Sorcerer, he began his career in *Weird Tales* #303 with "To Become a Sorcerer," which was expanded into a novel, *The Mask of the Sorcerer*, published by New English Library in 1995. (Alas, there is no American publisher yet.) The Sekenre story in the present issue is a "reprint" from the British magazine, *Interzone*, although it has never before been published in North America. Two more stories appeared in *Interzone*, which might be run in *Weird Tales*® if there is reader interest. One appears in the final (and 30th) issue of W. Paul Ganley's *Weirdbook*, another in the second issue of the new British magazine *Odyssey*, and yet another is forthcoming in *Adventures in Sword & Sorcery*. Yes, we would like to write more of them.

Jeffrey Goddin quotes the Irish writer Padraic Collum about Lord Dunsany: "His fantasy is of the highest order. There's not a social idea in it." Which could be the basis for a whole new editorial sometime. Ursula Le Guin remarked once that one reads Dunsany for his prose, "since he was a dreadful reactionary," so maybe it's just as well.

We might get another editorial out of a clipping from the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, which reads "Fla. Girl and 4 Other Teens Accused of Killing Her Parents," with a subtitle, "Police point to a 'Vampire Clan' A detective said: 'They apparently like to suck blood.'"

It all sounds much too much like the scenario of Christopher Lee Walters's "The Renfields" in this issue. However, as we've had the story in inventory for quite a while, it must be a case of art anticipating life.

Lelia Loban Lee writes:

In issue #4, your artist, Douglas Beekman, has outdone himself, with his fine painting of a winning moment in the annual Underworld Eyeball Rolling Competition, a sport too little appreciated on the surface, despite its large and loyal following of fans down below. It's unfortunate that the competitor's name does not appear in the credit, but I believe that Beekman depicts the 1988 champion from Eastern Stygia in the Middle-Distance Giant Eyeball Division. For those unfamiliar with Eyeball Rolling, this sport originated as an ancient feast-day ritual to tenderize the fruit of a week-long hunt. While the much smaller goat, human, and monkey eyeballs used in the Pixie Division do not require such treatment for culinary purposes (indeed, the modern style of competition frequently renders eyeballs unfit for consumption), a Cyclopean Giant Eyeball, such as the one shown in the Beekman painting, becomes quite a delicacy when rolled for six to ten miles, pressed, sliced thin, and served raw, with a generous slathering of bat-brain butter. The modern competitor must roll the eyeball (in a manner similar to log-rolling) with feet or equivalent appendages, depending on the athlete's species, up a steep, rocky incline to a precipice. The athlete must not only balance on the swiftly rolling, wet, slick surface of the orb, but must conserve sufficient energy to break into the interior at the finish, to demonstrate that the eyeball is now palatable. You can see from Beekman's painting what a rare degree of physical fitness Eyeball Rolling requires. I commend him for introducing this sport to the ignorant and frequently indolent dwellers on the surface.

Just how Ms. Lee came by her first-hand knowledge of this subject, she did not explain.

Franklyn Searight praises a new writer, Jonathan Shipley:

My selection for first place in the Winter 1996-7 issue goes to Jonathan Shipley's "From the Shores of Tripoli." I particularly enjoyed his effort because he comes across as an accomplished storyteller, and in my view the story is of the *utmost importance*. Shipley has not relied upon flowery prose to mask the absence of a decent yarn.

The **Most Popular Story** in issue #4 was Thomas Ligotti's ominous and magical "Teatro Grottesco," with Darrell Schweitzer's "The Sorcerer's Gift" a close second, and Jonathan Shipley's debut story, "From the Shores of Tripoli" a strong third. And the late Margo Skinner's poem "Prime" also attracted favorable notice.

Q

SHADOWINGS

by Douglas E. Winter



sacrament \sak-re-mənt\ n {ME sacrament, sacrament, fr. OF & LL; OF, fr. LL sacramentum, fr. L, oath of allegiance, obligation, fr. *sacrare*, to consecrate} 1: a formal religious act that is sacred as a sign or symbol of a spiritual reality; esp : one believed to have been instituted or recognized by Jesus Christ. 2 cap: the eucharistic elements; specif: blessed sacrament.

Sacrament, by Clive Barker.

New York: HarperCollins, hardcover, \$25.00.
Harper, paperback, 605 pp., \$6.99.

Will Rabjohns, the protagonist of Clive Barker's latest and best novel, is a controversial photographer of endangered and dying species. "For most of his adult life he'd made photographs of the untamed world, reporting to the human tribe the tragedies that occurred in contested territories. They were seldom human tragedies. It was the populace of the other world that withered and perished daily. And as he witnessed the steady erosion of the wilderness, the hunger in him grew to leap the fences and be part of it, before it was gone."

That hunger is born of a hollow ambition that has driven Will since his youth: "He was not . . . designed for happiness. It was too much like contentment, and contentment was too much like sleep." In the novel's opening act, it brings him to Hudson Bay, where images of polar bears wallowing in garbage will provide a mournful conclusion to what may be his final book of photographs. In his forty-first year of life, he is lost to melancholy, the onset of middle age and a dire sense of things winding down. In a world that seems defined by death, his success seems meaningless, and the purpose of his photographs, and of his life, is unclear. "The less alive you were, the better chance you had at living. There was probably a lesson in that somewhere, though it was a bitter one."

When a bear is wounded, a misguided sense of responsibility leads Will into its violent embrace. This is death, he thinks: "This is what you've photographed so many times. The dolphin drowning in the net, pitifully quiescent; the monkey twitching among its dead fellows, looking at him with a gaze Will could not stand to meet, except through his camera. They were all the same in this moment, he and the monkey, he and the bear. All ephemeral things, running out of time."

It is not death, but epiphany. Ravaged and comatose, Will's body heals while his mind returns to the thirteenth year of his youth in England. The second son of Eleanor and Hugo Rabjohns — a philosopher and domestic tyrant whose later scholarship echoes Julia Kristeva — Will grew up in the shadow of his brother, Nathaniel (who, like Barker's own brother, Roy, seemed more truly his father's son); but when Nathaniel died in an accident, Eleanor withdrew into polite madness and Hugo moved the family from Manchester to the Yorkshire village of Burnt Yarley.

There, in a ruined maze known as the Courthouse — a madman's throne of judgment for those who would abuse animals — Will meets the man and woman whom he will learn to love and hate more strongly than his parents: "Jacob Steep, with his soot-and-gold eyes and black beard and pale poet's hands" and glorious Rosa McGee, "who had the gold of Steep's eyes in her hair and the black of his beard in her gaze, but who was as fleshy and passionate as he was sweatless and unmoved."

This curious, unearthly pair join with Will in the most crucial of the triadic structures through which

his life has been defined: Will and his parents, Will and his childhood friends, Will and his photographic team, Will and his lovers — a series of incomplete men and women united and transformed by the enigma that is his life. Steep is the "Killer of Last Things," stalking the planet with knife in hand to put an end to each dying species. Once he had believed that, by recording each act of extinction in a journal, he could earn God's forgiveness; but now, like the elder Will, whose photographs no longer seem sufficient, Steep doubts the purpose of his life; soon he argues that, without purpose, there is no God — and no bounds to violence: "We're alone, with the power to do whatever we want." His consort, Mrs. McGee, mingles desires both carnal and fatal, played out through her "rosaries" — strange ropes that cavort like viperous extensions of her flesh. Their odd coupling has spanned three centuries, and Rosa's womb has carried eighty-seven children, all of whom died at birth.

Steep's ennui is leavened by the young and inquisitive Will, who offers the prospect of a new companion. Steep offers his apt pupil a simple but lasting lesson: "Living and dying we feed the fire." His secret knowledge of the darkness, and the need to hold it at bay, seems profound and seductive: "For an instant... Will saw himself at Jacob's side, walking in a city street, and Steep was shining out of every pore, and people were weeping with gratitude that he came to light their darkness."

Steep's tutelage is swift and certain: Will learns to feed the fire — to kill — by casting a moth into a flame. When, wielding Steep's thirsty blade, he butchers two birds, Steep asks him to imagine that they were the last of their species: "This will not come again ... Nor this, nor this ..." Such an act, Will realizes, could change the world.

When Will and Steep touch, the spilled blood summons something more, a vision of Steep's past. In 1730, elsewhere in the bucolic English countryside, Steep was sent to confront the visionary artist Thomas Simeon, whose talents had succumbed first to debauchery and then to the patronage of a mysterious mystic and satyric sermonizer named Gerard Rukenau. Simeon had been brought to Rukenau's retreat in the Hebrides to chronicle, in paintings, the construction of an arcane cathedral known as the *Domus Mundi* (literally, the House of the World). When Simeon left, Steep was dispatched to bring him home; but the painter committed suicide, poisoning himself with his pigments, rather than return to Rukenau. Before his death, he offered Steep the petal of a flower, and the meaning of the true sacrament:

I have the Holy of Holies here, the Ark of the Covenant, the Sangraal, the Great Mystery itself, right here on the tip of my little finger.... If I could paint this perfection . . . put it on a sheet of paper so that it showed its true glory, every painting in every chapel in Rome, every illumination of every *Book of Hours*, every picture I ever made for every one of Rukenau's damned invocations would be ... superfluous.

Steep blamed Rukenau for the painter's death and rejected his teachings: "You gave him your genius; he paid you in lunacy. That makes him a thief, at very least. I won't serve him after this. And I will never forgive him." The rage of his apostasy translated into the zealous assault upon creation that became his life's work: "If the world were a simpler place, we would not be lost in it. . . . We wouldn't be greedy for novelty. We wouldn't always want something new, always something new! We'd live the way Thomas wanted to live, in awe of the mysteries of a petal." His passion for simplicity — and, in time, for absence — finds Steep, like the misguided forces of morality in *Weaveworld* and *Imajica*, seeking to cleanse the world: the building of a New Eden without error or imperfection — the ideal place to find God, to understand the purpose of his existence.

Steep's memories, like his lessons, taint Will, transforming a lost child into a lost man who desperately chronicles the last of things: "He shaped you, Will. He sowed the hopes and the disappointments, he sowed the guilt and the yearning." When, as an adult, Will looks upon one of Simeon's paintings, he recognizes the horrifying relationship to his own photographs: "They were the before and after scenes, bookends to the holocaust text that lay between. And the author of that text? Steep, of course. Simeon had painted the moment before Steep appeared: all life in terror at Steep's imminence. Will had caught the moment after: all life in extremis, the fertile acre become a field of desolation."

When Will awakens from the coma, very little has changed since his mauling by the bear — or since his youth. "They were in a world of endings, or early and unexpected goodbyes, not so unlike the time from which he'd wakened." He is living in the midst of death — of animals, to be sure, but also of friends, and especially his best friend and former lover Patrick, now dying of AIDS.

The past, once remembered, pursues Will with feral intensity. Lord Fox, an avatar of his guilt, haunts Will, forcing him to look upon the ravaged world with the unfettered eyes of his childhood: "God wants you to see," Lord Fox tells him. "Don't ask me why. That's between you and God. I'm just the go-between." The creature confronts Will with a conundrum, proposing that "the passing of things, of days and beasts and men he'd loved, was just a cruel illusion and memory, a clue to its unmasking." This revelation only amplifies Will's painful knowledge that he, like Steep, is a pretender: pretending to find purpose in life, pretending to be human.

Steep and McGee, awakened from their dire labors by Will's memories, return to Burnt Yarley and assault the now-aged Hugo Rabjohns. Without family or children, Will is a race of one, and Steep plots his extinction; but Will, who can no longer grieve, offers the perilous pair their only hope: knowledge and healing. When he touches his nemesis again, the vision he sees is both frightening and enlightening:

This is what Steep saw when he looked at living things. Not their beauty, not their particularity, just their smothering, deafening fecundity. Flesh begetting flesh, din begetting din. It wasn't hard to fathom, because he'd thought it himself, in his darkest times. Seen the human tide advancing on species he'd loved — beasts too wild or too wise to compromise with the invader — and wished for a plague to wither every human womb. Heard the din and longed for a gentle death to silence every throat. Sometime not even gentle. He understood. Oh Lord, he understood.

When Will tells Steep that God moves each of them, "the words, though he'd never thought he'd hear them from his own tongue, were true."

God was in him now. Always had been. Steep had the rage of some Judgmental Father in his eye, but the divinity Will had in him was no less a Lord, though He talked through the mouth of a fox and loved life more than Will had supposed life could be loved. A Lord who'd come before him in innumerable shapes over the years. Some pitiful, to be sure, some triumphant, A blind polar bear on a garbage heap; two children in painted masks; Patrick sleeping; Patrick smiling; Patrick speaking love. Camelias on a windowsill and the skies of Africa. His Lord was there, everywhere, inviting him to see the soul of things.

Will's journey home to Burnt Yarley and his childhood is but an arc of another and greater circle: he pursues Steep north to the most fertile of the Inner Hebrides, tiny Three — "the granary of the islands" — where Barker spent so many memorable days in his youth. There, hidden in an icy outcrop of rock, is the *Domus Mundi*, the legendary House of the World; but its interior is a grey darkness, lit with pale flames that disclose walls and floors made of filth and clogged with rotting trash, a sad mirror of the dying psyche of the world.

High atop an elaborate web of knotted rope and filthy woodwork waits the throne of Gerard Rukenau. Despite his serpentine looks, the mystic and messiah Rukenau is no satanic majesty, just a mundane man whose arrogance and pride have engineered his own prison and Hell. A step outside of the *Domus Mundi* would forfeit its gift of immortality; embittered and lonely, he has covered its glory with dirt and excrement, rigging the elaborate ropework to assure that he never has to set foot upon the House of the World again.

Rukenau was the bastard child of a church-builder. Rejected by his father, he determined to build a cathedral that God would so desire to visit that all of his father's churches would be left empty. He studied architecture and magic, learned the sacred geometries, and finally enlisted the aid of the Nilot, an angel who could construct a temple so profound that "a priest might see the Creator's labors at a single glance." But a glance was not enough for Rukenau; he needed an artist's vision — the vision of a Thomas Simeon — to comprehend the glory of his labors.

When the outcast Steep, who had failed to return Simeon to the *Domus Mundi*, re-enters its halls, he greets his former master with the killing blade; but Rosa follows, scouring the filth from the walls and exposing the glories hidden beneath: a vast temple of life whose essence is "the throb and shimmer of living things," the "glorious ... madness" that is the glory of creation.

As Rukenau dies, he offers a final revelation: Steep and Rosa are one. They are the angel known as the Nilot, divided by his necromancy. Each half, male and female, has adapted to the world of humanity through their experience of gender, embracing the most superficial impulses of man and woman: to terminate and to procreate. "Living in the world with stolen names, learning the cruel assumptions of their gender from what they saw about them, unable to live apart, although it was a torment to be so close to the other, yet never close enough." Now, in the House of the World, a mere touch reunites them, Rosa's bleeding brightness merging with Steep, marrying him, becoming whole ... becoming one.

The Nilot moves into the heart of the House, intent on undoing it, and Will follows. "The deeper they ventured the more it seemed he was treading not among the echoes of the world, but in the world itself, his soul a thread of bliss passing into its mysteries. . . . He did not grieve, knowing his life was a day long, or an hour. He did not wonder who made him. He did not wish to be other. He did not pray. He did not hope. He only was, and was, and was, and that was the joy of it."

The journey takes him home again, to Burnt Yarley, where he walks the cold slopes of his youth, the forgotten places and faces that live inside him still, seeing them with sublime wisdom: "The creators of the world had not retreated to the heights. They were everywhere. They were stones, they were trees, they were shafts of light and burgeoning seeds. They were broken things, they were dying things, and they were all that sprang up from things dying and broken. And where they were, he was too. Fox and God

and the creature between." Finally his footsteps lead to the place where the birds had fallen and, in time, to San Francisco and Patrick's house, where Will fulfills his promise to attend his friend's final moments. But when Patrick goes gently into the night, Will feels an unaccustomed discomfort. For the first time in his life, the man who watched and chronicled the dying of so many breeds feels like a voyeur. "Maybe it would be better just to go, he thought; leave the living to their grief, and the dead to their ease. He belonged in neither tribe, it seemed, and that unfixedness, which had been a pleasure to him as he went through the world, was now no pleasure at all. It only made him lonely."

At last, it seems, Will Rabjohns has awoken. He' is no longer content to stand idly by, watching, waiting, for death to come. "The season of visions was at an end, at least for now, and its inciter had departed, leaving Will to take his wisdom back to the tribe. To tell what he'd seen and felt in the heart of the *Domus Mundi*. To celebrate what he knew, and turn it to its healing purpose." There is only one place for him: "his only true and certain home, the world."

It is a lesson for both the artist and the man. The act of creation, like that of existence, must be defined on our own terms, not those of others — certainly not those of parents or teachers, critics or readers, and certainly not those of politics, whether social or sexual — and in terms of sacrament. Creating and living, Barker reminds us, are acts as sacred as those of communion, signifying or at least striving to signify a spiritual reality; if not, they are as purposeless and as vile as murder.

Sacrament is not simply the best of Clive Barker's novels, but also the most directly and profoundly autobiographical of his fictions. It is his first novel with an openly gay protagonist (which, even in these "enlightened" times, hindered its commercial prospects); and it is one of a handful of contemporary novels in which the sexuality of the protagonist, whether gay or straight, is absolutely essential to its plot. There is, however, no sense of polemic. Just as the novel cannot be read as a paean to animal rights, its take on gay lifestyles is by no means a gentle, let alone an encouraging, one. In the very real world of *Sacrament*, gay and straight relationships are equally difficult, and troubled; Barker argues convincingly against gender stereotypes and roles, as well as warning of the dangers of defining oneself through them.

The plot is deceptive in its simplicity, a characteristic puzzle box of secret histories whose telling and retelling are the key to revelation. In these pages Barker revisits themes — notably, the urge for unity and transformation — that have been crucial to earlier works. It is no accident that *Sacrament* echoes another autobiographical novel, *Weaveworld*, at essential moments, but here Barker strips away the veneer of fantasy (which plays a minor role in the proceedings), finding the courage to create a metaphoric wonderland that cannot be ignored or dismissed as the stuff of escapism. *Sacrament* is remarkable, for Barker the fantasist, in its retreat from the elaborate mythologies of *Imajica* and the novels of "The Art" in favor of a subdued unreality whose most chimerical qualities are biblical in character. It is equally remarkable in its refusal to concede that unreality, to suggest that its tropes have anything but direct and vital meaning for the reader — and the writer.

Will Rabjohn's profession as a photographer of dying species is an elegant and, indeed, inspired metaphor for the writer, the filmmaker, the artist of the dark fantastic — in other words, for Clive Barker himself. The truth is underscored in a telling aside about reviews: "The critical response to both the books and exhibitions had often been antagonistic. Few reviewers had questioned Will's skills — he had the temperament, the vision, and the technical grasp to be a great photographer. But why, they complained, did he have to be so relentlessly grim? Why did he have to seek out images that evoked despair and death when there was so much beauty in the natural world?"

Why, indeed? Darkness, Barker counsels, is very much in the eye of the beholder. The bloodthirsty scourge known as Jacob Steep is only the most recent of the light-bearing zealots who burn their way through the pages of Barker's fiction. Steep fears the dark, and desires more than anything to hold it at bay; but Will Rabjohns, like Clive Barker, wants to know the dark, to embrace its mysteries, to rid us of the fear of the unknown and all that is done in its name. *Sacrament* is a testament to the explorers of that darkness, and a challenge to those who would write in its name.

At one juncture, Will offers a brief riposte, discussing a New Age spiritualist who comforts Patrick: "Oh, there's light in my pictures . . . light aplenty. It just wasn't the kind of illumination [she] would want to meditate upon." [p. 306] Before the *Domus Mundi*, Will considered his photographs as a kind of bleak magic, one that, like his childhood killing of the birds, might work change in the world, but through negation and despair. But the light Will offers after entering the House of the World shines brightly: "Take pleasure not because it's fleeting, but because it exists at all." The light is one that his photographs, like Barker's own work in so many media, cannot capture, but which, with wisdom and conscience, can suggest and, indeed, exalt: "This presence of all things, seen and unseen, around and about, remember. There will be days in your life when you'll need to have this feeling again, to know that all that's gone from the world hasn't really gone at all; it's just not in sight." Q

editorial addenda by Darrell Schweitzer

The Encyclopedia of Fantasy

edited by John Clute and John Grant St. Martin's Press, 1997 1049 pp. \$75.00

We can recommend this massive volume almost without reservations. It is a companion to the similarly enormous tome, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, and it will — we predict — sweep all the awards next year. It will also prove to be a definitive reference work for decades to come, and turn out to be even more influential than the science fiction volume.

At first glance, the entries seem to cover the usual: authors, magazines, films, themes, motifs, etc. But the reader notices an great deal of jargon, most of it in small capital letters, which means that each such term has an entry of its own. Thus we are referenced and cross-referenced and cross-cross-referenced to such entries as TAPROOT TEXT, POLDER, WAINSCOTT, LANDSCAPES, MYTH OF ORIGIN, GODDESS, THINNING, THRESHOLD, ACCURSED WANDERER, FOREST, GNOSTIC FANTASY, SLEEPER UNDER THE HILL, and so on for some distance.

Ultimately it not only makes sense, but proves extremely illuminating. What's going on here is something very ambitious indeed: an attempt to create an entire critical vocabulary for discussing fantasy literature.

You might ask why this is necessary. Fantasy, after all, is older than everything else. It is older than the written word. (See, in this book, TAPROOT TEXTS, FOLKLORE, and several more.) But fantasy as *a genre* is a relatively recent development (see GENRE FANTASY) created by Del Rey Books in the mid-1970s under decidedly sub-literary circumstances. And while there are any number of author studies (of Tolkien, Dunsany, Cabell, etc) around, these often occur within the context of mainstream literature and are written by mainstream critics whose realist or post-realist biases may not leave them quite compatible with the subject matter. It is surprising, but true, that fantasy does not have the same rich body of critical literature that science fiction does. There is very little which addresses topics within the context of a (now inescapable) fantasy genre, which has its own archetypes, tropes, and cross-references.

For example, a great many fantasies deal with the loss of magic. The dragons and wizards go away at the end. The adventure may be glorious, but by the time it's over we have a sense that this is the *last time*. Possibly a whole new age or cycle of history begins, as it does at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*. This can be a powerful metaphor for maturity, old age, the assumption of responsibilities, or other irrevocable change. It is not something found in just one book or one author, but recurrent throughout the genre. Clute and Grant call it THINNING. We need that term and a whole lot of others like it, which are unique to the discussion of fantasy. Such markers will trace the influence of *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* for years to come.

The actual entries on individual writers, which range in time from Homer and Lucius Annaeus Seneca to Thomas Ligotti and Ellen Kushner (or, for that matter, Darrell Schweitzer), tend to be expertly done, with few exceptions. Only the Lovecraft entry (by David Langford and Colin Wilson) is seriously skewed, and even manages to cram several factual errors into a single sentence, as when we are told that "The Shadow Out of Time" was the Old Gent's "last finished work, written about the time he learned he had cancer." (Wrong on all counts: The story was written in 1934. Lovecraft did not become ill, see a doctor, or begin to express intimations of immediate mortality in his private letters — our most intimate,

and often only, source — until well into 1936; besides which, "The Haunter of the Dark" was written later than "The Shadow Out of Time.")

Any review of *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* at this point has to be preliminary. The only way to honestly report on such a volume is use it for several years and *then* review it, which isn't very practical. It is too massive to be read from end to end. Those cross-references are like little wormholes which weave in and out of the text, depositing us, sometimes, in surprising places, like a whole long section on Tarzan movies, which is better than you'll find in most film books. We can browse endlessly. We can turn to our own areas of expertise (Lovecraft, Dunsany, the *Weird Tales* writers, Mervyn Wall) and find, on the whole, that the facts are sound, the analysis intelligent, and that the scope of the work as a whole is by several orders of magnitude more ambitious than anything previously attempted.

The Best of Weird Tales: 1923

edited by Marvin Kaye and John Gregory Betancourt. Bleak House (an imprint of Wildside Press, 522 Park Ave., Berkeley Heights NJ 07922), 1997 129 pp. \$12.00

It would cost you thousands of dollars to obtain the contents of this book elsewhere. All other considerations aside, *The Best of Weird Tales: 1923*, is a real bargain. It is the first of a projected series, each volume selecting the best from a given year of "The Unique Magazine." Since 1923 issues of *Weird Tales* can easily cost you five hundred dollars apiece (more for the first few), *if you can find them at all*, here you have, for a modest price and with good production values, the truly unobtainable.

Think of it as a core sample, drilled from the lowest sedimentary stratum of pulp horror fantasy. As such, it is of enormous paleontological interest, even if we have to admit that a good deal of what came up was mud.

It's a deep, dark secret, hidden behind those astronomical prices for the fabulously scarce early issues, that *Weird Tales* did not make an auspicious start. Had the magazine only survived a year or two, it would have been no more than a curiosity, a failed first effort, for the most part poorly written, badly laid out, and wretchedly illustrated. Fortunately, the quality improved rapidly in just a few years, so that we may safely predict that the 1925 or 1926 volumes in this series will begin to show pure gold.

There's no doubt that editors Kaye and Betancourt have indeed picked the best of 1923. All of the stories are at least readable. They're fun, in a crude way, but only serve to remind us why the *Weird Tales* greats, Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, Henry Whitehead, Robert E. Howard, and the rest *seemed* so electri-fyingly wonderful at the time. Here's what the competition was like. (Not surprisingly, Lovecraft's "Dagon," reprinted here to represent the October 1923 issue, is conspicuously the best of the lot.)

The other stories are of varying interest. "An Adventure in the Fourth Dimension" by Farnsworth Wright (the very man who, as editor of *Weird Tales*, would bring about the magazine's amazing transformation a couple years later) is a pioneering, clumsy attempt at the sort of "funny alien" science fiction Stanley G. Weinbaum was to make popular in the mid-'30s. "The Two Men Who Murdered Each Other" stretches the long arm of coincidence outrageously, but has moments of effective description. "Beyond the Door" (one of the very few early *Weird Tales* stories Lovecraft liked) has a genuinely creepy atmosphere. "Lucifer," by John. D. Swain, manages a cruel, surprising twist. Most of the others are anecdotes of madness, revenge, and rudimentary hauntings, by writers who did not subsequently become famous.

But this was the beginning. Here you can see how a great tradition started.

Mosig At Last: A Psychologist Looks at H.P. Lovecraft

by Yozan Dirk W. Mosig Necronomicon Press, 1997 128 pp. \$7.95

At the recent Cthulhu Mythos convention, Necronomicon, held in Providence, Rhode Island, at the very base of Lovecraft's old neighborhood of College Hill (along the steep streets of which your editor conducted a somewhat breathless walking tour), there were two guests of honor. One was Brian Lumley, which is obvious and fitting.

The other was Yozan Dirk W. Mosig, who may not be a household name, but who is, in his own way, equally important. For the occasion, this volume essays was published.

It's astonishing to discover how little Mosig actually wrote. The bibliography lists a total fifteen articles about Lovecraft, all published between 1973 and 1980. The present volume contains nine of them, plus what appear to be four short original pieces.

Despite this, Donald Burleson, Peter Cannon, S.T. Joshi, and Robert M. Price all attest in their tributes at the back of the book that Mosig is a seminal figure ("the Northrup Frye of Lovecraft criticism," says Burleson), who raised Lovecraft criticism to the level of a serious discipline and paved the way for a

whole new generation of Lovecraftian scholars, including Messrs Burleson, Cannon, Joshi, and Price. Dr. Mosig, a professional psychologist (who has added the Yozan to his name after having become, among his other accomplishments, a Zen monk; he also describes himself as a follower of Bertrand Russell and B.F. Skinner), applied a variety of psychological approaches, not to Lovecraft's life, but to his writing. One dazzling piece, "The Four Faces of 'The Outsider,'" explores a single story as autobiography, as Jungian allegory, as a Freudian and mechanistic nightmare, and *makes them all work*, each facet providing new and striking insights.

More than anyone else, Mosig was the first to show us Lovecraft as a serious thinker and an artist of almost infinite depth. That he wrote only a small amount merely shows that if you say something important enough, you don't have to say it at great length.

(Available from Necronomicon Press, P.O. Box 1304, West Warwick RI 02893. Add \$1.50 for postage.)

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Flower Water
by Tanith Lee

illustrated by George Barr

Lady Emeraldine Morrow vanished, or died, yesterday; and the circumstances were reported in many of the papers. It was the bizarre nature of events and their number of witnesses, which led to the publicity.

In the midst of a private festival, as the sun began to set, Lady Emeraldine was rowed across her small private lake, to her small private island. Just visible from shore, she there commenced to regale her three hundred guests with vivid torrents of music on her harp.

Her many accomplishments, coupled to her great beauty, have been well known and much publicized for years. Also her enormous good humor, her happy, light-hearted disposition. And, in some circles, her apparent callousness.

The music rang out, chords, glissandi, and the sun sank into the woods, and the sky turned from crimson to the coolest mauve.

It was at this moment, in the last of the twilight, that Lady Emeraldine ceased playing, in the very middle of a spirited improvisation. As startled applause broke forth, a loud cry soared upwards from the island. Then came a burst of flame, a sort of explosion. Something quite small, dark and hard, shot into the air, then fell down into the lake, and with a sizzle, disappeared.

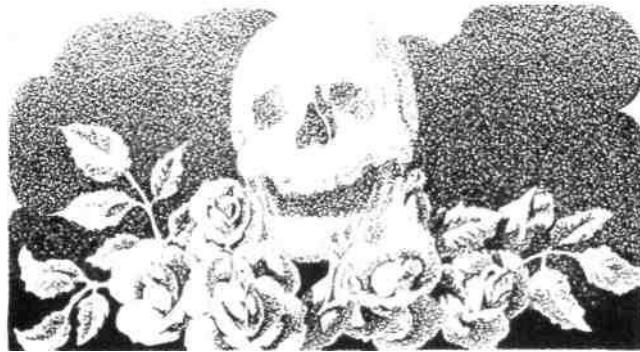
Guests swam or rowed in swarms to the island. They found a charred place beside the harp, which was itself unscathed. Of Lady Emeraldine there was no evidence at all.

There was of course talk of spontaneous combustion, or of abduction by fiery creatures from some other world.

Myself, I am strongly inclined to think that Lady Emeraldine was one of us.

Until I met him, under the coloured lamps of the Public Gardens, I had had an unpleasant life. My story is all too common. Father a drunkard. Mother a washerwoman. Put out at fifteen on the streets.





Here I unoriginally plied my trade in the oldest profession on earth, and with very limited success, being neither very attractive, nor very enthusiastic, and by no means a talented actress.

As the years passed, I had been also beaten and abused. I had thieved and been thieved from. I developed the expected passion for gin, and lost the last of my slight looks. Some of my teeth dropped out, my eyes were dim, my balance unpredictable. In this state, at twenty-four, here I was in the Gardens, not looking for custom, certainly, but tottering up and down, blearily eyeing the paper lanterns in mawkish solitude, before a police constable should behold and move me along.

When he spoke to me, indeed I took him for the police.

"Can't a poor girl come in and joy herself for five minutes for no cost, without she gets herded away?" I whined, in traditional, useless obstinacy.

"I don't suggest you go," he said, with a voice too educated for any of the police I had come across, which had been many. "No, stay with me."

"What, you want to walk with me, do you?" I croaked. I said, I was no actress, and though I had been trying, for at least five years, to act the pathetic sodden old harlot I had become, I was really no good at it.

"I'd like to hear your story," said he.

"Scon told. For the price of a gin."

"Champagne," said he.

At that I felt I should straighten up. "For the likes of me? What are you after? What's your game?"

He was young, rich, and handsome. He shone with health and wealth and grooming. He must therefore have some perverted whim. Fill me with expensive liquor and then slice me in scallops.

"We can remain at all times in the general gaze," he said. "I was only moved by your plight." But when he said that, he suddenly burst out laughing. I could see, in fact, he had the most carefree face I had ever looked at. I have seen one more such, since then. But I will come to that.

"Lead on then, Charlie," I said, thinking he was truly mad.

"My name is Raphael Pemberton. And yours?"

"Lizzie Lines."

We shook hands, and all about, very likely, the fashionable persons in the park glanced askance at us.

He took me to the open ballroom in the centre of the Gardens, and straight off ordered two bottles of a famous champagne, on ice, also plates of oysters, bits of geese in aspic, jellies, cakes, and heaven knows what.

As I sat there I thought, *He must be going to poison me, slip something in my glass. Blame my demise on my weak condition.* I wracked my brains to remember strange deaths of blowsy, nasty whores in public thoroughfares, with a handsome gentleman nearby. Probably I had only missed hearing of them.

In any event, my life was not so grand I yearned that much to keep it, or so it seemed after a couple draughts of the champagne.

Raphael Pemberton, meanwhile, began to question me. He wanted to learn about this vile existence I had had. He could see, he told me, that I had suffered.

As I regaled him with my history, thickly laying on all the horrors, and inventing several new ones — my dying mother's bedside with the non-existent little ones snivelling in my skirts, my noble father renouncing the drink, and dying of want of it — actually he had been squashed by a runaway beer barrel — Raphael stared at me, his face working as if with grief until, every few moments, he burst out laughing again.

With the champagne I too began to see the funny side of me, and soon we were rolling in the aisles, a sideshow for the adjoining tables.

Additionally, I forgot to act my part. I became myself.

At last he said, between our gulps and hiccups, "You seem improved, Lizzie."

"Well," I said, "both my parents trod the boards — the stage, that is — before their luck changed. I had

no talent, but I learned how to speak. Is that," I added, "why you're so amused?"

His pretty face fell. "No. Oh no, Lizzie." Then he bloomed, I have to say, like the rose in his buttonhole. "What a beautiful night!"

"Not bad," said I.

"Tell me, Lizzie," said Raphael Pemberton, as we began upon the third bottle, "would you like to be young and lovely again?"

"I'm not so old as I look. It's the gin wot's done for me, guv'nor. I was *never* lovely."

"For the first, then, Lizzie. How about it?"

"If you're buying."

"Selling, in a way. How old would you say *I* was?"

I squinted. Strong drink, by removing all pretense at focus, had oddly improved my vision. "Twenty-one," I said.

"Wrong, Lizzie. Seventy-one would be nearer the mark."

I smiled. Humour the fool. We were, as he had said, in the general gaze. And it seemed he had not poisoned me yet.

"You don't believe me, Lizzie Lines. Of course not. I look young. I'm handsome. And, evidently, well-off. The latter springs from the former. It can for you. I feel so happy, Lizzie. How do you feel?"

"I feel splendid. When the drink wears off, I'll be back where I was."

"Just imagine," said Raphael Pemberton, "there was a drink that never wore off."

"Oh yes?"

"A drink that, after one swallow, made you feel so well, so glad, as if — as if your heart was full of stars. Always just a little tipsy. Never a bad day. Never a sad night. No pain. No sorrow. Think of that, Lizzie."

"I am."

"Does it appeal?"

"What do you think? Besides, obviously it makes you young. Twenty-one, seventy-one. And good-looking. And it makes you rich, too?"

"Wealth comes from the rest. If you're utterly healthy, completely attractive, and your mind sharp, and your attitude merry at all times—you can't avoid riches, Lizzie, getting to be rich. Just think what you could have done, with all that."

"Well, Ralphie, I didn't have the chance, did I?"

"You have it now."

He gazed at me soberly for all of three seconds. Then he grinned. Well-being flashed and flamed from him. You could never think a blazing torch looked sick.

"This is a drink," I said.

"Yes, Lizzie. And I offer it to you."

"Why?"

"I have just one dose, and I must give it to someone."

"And why is that?"

"Because, outside the human frame, it's indestructible. I can't pour it away. Not down a drain. Not into the sea. I don't even want to lock it up because, in a thousand years, someone might find it. But you. I think you deserve it, Lizzie."

"Oh, yes. And why is *that*? For my terrible life?"

"Because you're such a bitch."

He told me then, as the dancers cavorted on the ballroom floor and the lamps burned lower in the trees, and the fourth bottle came; and I knew that, jolly as a jack-rabbit, in the morning I was going to wish I was dead — he told me about Aquaflora.

Someone had found a hidden spring, it transpired, beneath a temple in Italy dedicated, in pagan times, to the goddess of nature, Flora.

This someone, whose name Raphael Pemberton claimed not to know, had drawn from the spring — reputed, according to a Latin inscription about the fount, to restore, heal, and bless — one flask. An ancient legend declared that barren women had sought the fount and drunk there in order to bear children, also that cripples had washed in it and grown whole, elderly men got back their youth, and many other such tales. What had become of all these recipients of miracles had never been said, but in the end, the spring was shut away by the priestess for reasons of spite.

The modern explorer who found the spring did not think for a moment it possessed any unusual qualities. He took the water as a curiosity. A day later, returning to the spot on other exploratory business, he found the spring had mysteriously dried up again. With the other excitements of his trip, he forgot the

matter.

It was over a year later, once more at home, that the traveler again took notice of the flask from Flora's spring. By this time he desired to impress a young lady, and so he bore the flask into her house, told her that here was the wine of the goddess of flowers, and she, out of bravura, poured a few drops into her tea cup, and drank them.

Within a quarter of an hour, a change became apparent. Her undeniable prettiness had escalated into a potent glamour. A strain in her left foot, that had been annoying her for days, vanished. Her hair, which was not very thick, took such a turn towards the luxuriant that all the pins fell out in a downpour. Within the day she could see farther than the most far-sighted man in her father's regiment, could hear a bat squeak, and had mastered the piano forte, which so far had eluded her, to the point of rendering the "Minute Waltz" in forty seconds. Her skin was like cream, her grace that of a swan, and two missing teeth had grown back.

Her unnamed swain, the traveler, lost no time himself in sampling the juice from the holy spring.

Presently two of the most attractive people in the country walked to the altar.

"And lived happily ever after," said I. "I suppose, in *fact*, for ever?"

"No," said Raphael Pemberton.

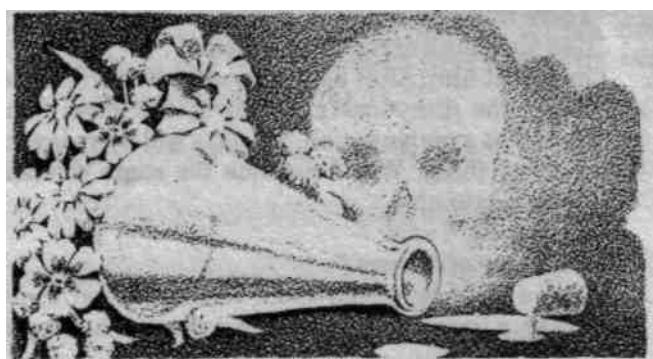
It seemed that the fortunate couple somehow slipped from the annals of history, and after them only the flask remained, its contents next portioned out in several equal measures.

"How many?" I asked.

"That I can't say. The last will and testament which brought me mine, informed me of nothing but the basic tale, and that the fluid, which might be called the Elixir of Life, but which was only named as Aquaflora, would give me health, youth, physical glory, luck, and perpetual happiness." At which Raphael Pemberton lifted his marvelous face to the sky. "And it has! Oh God, it has!"

"But there are others?"

"Many. How many I have no idea. Sometimes — I believe I have unearthed one. People of great beauty



and talent. People who are never for a moment sad. I read once of a fellow screaming with mirth at a funeral. I sought him out. I'd been wrong; he was only subject to a rare laughing disease."

We drank a little more champagne. The sixth bottle now, I thought.

"You said," I said, "that you reckoned me a bitch,"

"Well you are, aren't you?" said my host, smiling lovingly at me. "All around me I can see the poor and ill and needy and broken. But you're a clown, Lizzie. You mock us all and you mean no one any good, not even yourself."

"Fine words for a gentleman," squawked I.

But, "Look," said Raphael. And from his coat he drew out a tiny phial full of a muddy brown mess. "With my own mouthful of the water came this other one. It may be that these were the last two measures from the flask. One for me. One for someone of my choosing."

"So you want to waste it on me. On a bitch. What about your mother? Your wife? Your mistress? Your fancy boy?"

"All of those," said Raphael, careless, light of heart, "are long dead. You see, when I took my dram, I was aging and almost alone. I didn't hesitate. And when I looked into my mirror, what a roar I sent up. I've been roaring every since. Oh, Lizzie. The worst news can't shake me. When I learned my only son had died, I had to hide my habitual, genuine smiles with a copy of the Times. If the world came to an end, there I'd be in space, charming as a comet, spinning with pleasure. *Nothing*, Lizzie, can bring me down. Think of it, Lizzie."

"But you want it for me as a *punishment*?"

"Not quite. It will suit you, Lizzie. You laugh at us all. It's in you already."

"There must be some catch."

"Can you think of one?" he asked.

I looked at him. After all the booze, I did believe the story, and the filthy-looking muck in the glass phial might well be a magic potion. My days had been devoid of any nice thing. Was I not due for some colossal change in fortune?

"It's poison," I said.

"It's water of flowers."

I had a strange notion then. I remembered some flowers in a vase in a public house where I had been sitting on a sailor's lap, and the flowers were past their best. In the obligatory fight that followed, the vase was knocked down and the flowers spilled and the water ran out on the edge of my dress. What a stink it had, that flower water.

But the lights were growing dull; and I bethought me of the Last Chance, the Final Risk, which, in fairy stories and in the silly dramas my parents had acted on the stage, must be taken or lost for ever.

So I uncorked the phial, sniffed it — it had actually no odour — and sipped. I waited a little after that, to see if there were any burning or discomfort. Nothing happened. So I tipped the contents, the Aquaflora, down my throat. "Cheers."

"Cheers, Lizzie," said Raphael.

And then he got up, and we went onto the floor, and danced a polka.

I knew I was drunk enough to try, but soon enough I understood that now I had a mastery of this polka that is not given to many. And by the time they cleared the floor to watch us, and by the time the orchestra itself surrendered and stood applauding, and I felt my back was straight, and my corset loose at my waist, and my hair tumbling down the colour of polished coal, and my hand white on his sleeve, and I could see every tree to the termination of the mile-long avenue, and hear every individual hand clapping, I knew he had not lied.

The champagne was gone. I would never need a drink again. The world — was my oyster.

"I feel quite wonderful," I cried to Raphael.

"So do we all," he said, and his voice, for a moment, was black as iron from the pit, before he burst out laughing, and I with him, in ecstatic joy.

When I went home with Raphael Pemberton to his fine home in the square, I believed I was going there for the eternal reason, and for the first time in my life, I was looking forward to it. And, perhaps, even more than that, to the bathroom he promised with the enormous mirror, where I could see to the full what so far I could only feel.

The servants were in bed — or perhaps dismissed, I now sometimes conclude — and he led me up the stairs by low light, and opened the door of the bathing apartment, which led off his chamber.

I left that door ajar, and outside I heard him in his vast bachelor bedroom, talking to me as I stripped under the gas-lamps and showed myself the new Lizzie Lines.

I am accustomed to her now, this paragon of raven hair and hand-span waist and skin like lilies. But then I could not see enough, turning this way, that way. And licking all around my new growing teeth, and admiring my corn-less feet, washing myself the while in delicious pomades that now I could have for myself simply by smiling at a man — and to smile, when one is feeling so incredibly well and strong, and brave — and victorious — and safe and confident — is *easy*.

Meanwhile, Raphael went on with a sort of monologue.

To start, I scarcely listened.

But now, I piece to together somewhat, for in the end, I heard the end.

He spoke of all his shining days of happiness, not one with any flaw. And of his nights of blissful

sleep unmarred even by any unappealing dream.

He spoke of his rise to wealth. Of all those idyllic spots he had visited and all those impossible conquests he had made. Of business ventures of pure success. Of the realization that, whatever he wished for, would soon be his.

And laughing, sometimes breaking into snatches of happy music and song, unable to restrain the sweeping delight of all and everything, which I too now had within me, Raphael now related how he had observed the miseries of the world, had looked upon its torments and its tears, even on its blood, and futile sacrifice, and never once had their shadows touched him.

"I've seen a woman hoarsely weeping at her husband's grave, I've seen the dead brought up in hundreds from a mine, I've seen a hopping child wasted by plague, and a city under a flood, and I've sung this very song, Lizzie.

"Lizzie, do you hear any strain in my voice? Do you, Lizzie. Regret, guilt, pain? No? I'm enwrapt in sweetness. For ever and a day."

I went out then, naked, in my exquisite flesh, and there he stood, Raphael Pemberton.

"Have you heard of the Last Straw, Lizzie? The one that breaks the back of the camel much overloaded? You, Lizzie, are it."

I laughed. I always laugh, now. Show me your wounds, I will lave them with laughter. If heaven falls, I shall fly above heaven. I cannot do otherwise.

"Perhaps you won't believe me, Lizzie Lines. I've offered this single phial of the elixir of life, this Aquaflora, seven hundred and eighty times, before I came to you. To the drunk I've offered it, and to the sober. To the rich and the destitute. To the sick, the dying, the agonized, and the mad. They all refused. This gave me some hope, Lizzie. But then, tonight, you crossed my path. I knew you at once. She'll take it, thought I. As so you did, Lizzie, you bitch."

And then Raphael Pemberton convulsed in a paean of hilarity, content, and pleasure, and as he did so, there broke from him one howl of anger louder than any thunder. Then he was on fire. He went up like a firework. Vanished in a few seconds. Lightnings, sparks, and gushes — I jumped back — laughing, of course laughing.

It took about a minute for him to be consumed in the golden detonation. And out of it there showered down only a veil of slightest ash, to touch the carpet scorched merely where he had stood. But one, tiny, wizened black thing there was, that shot up and fell back, and lay there, which might have been his heart. All that is, that a lifetime of fulfillment, happiness, and perfect peace had left of his heart.

There is no other phial of Aquaflora in existence; at least, I have none. Envously, I deduce, you would read of the delirious wonders of my life, if I paused to repeat them. I have had all I want. More. A cornucopia. And, with good reason, I have never been sad. But, more to the point, even in the presence of the darkest and most awful, rent and desolate horror of this earth, never have I felt the faintest hint of hurt or sorrow. As for despair, I cannot even recall that angel with its sallow, leaden wings.

I look at you, without pity, for pity grows from fear. Your sufferings. Your endings.

With my heart brim-full of melody, I say, I the smiling, beautiful, and blessed, you cannot be more envious than I.

Your lovely pain, your tortures, and your anguish that I cannot even in a dream recapture. Your loss, your rage, expressed in the poetry of words and souls, tragedy, romance — cheated, I.

Melody and laughter have shrivelled, by now, my heart, little as a raisin, like the heart of Raphael Pemberton, who gave me this.

Far, far off, like a mist glimpsed fading on a hill, I think I see — nights when I sobbed or stormed, the glories of agony. The power of riven love. And my destitution, and my bad sight, and how my teeth left my mouth. My triumph over these paltry terrible things. My dignity. My inheritance, my rights, the sword's edge, honing me, telling me of my life. But perhaps it did not, and I was only what he said, and deserved only what I got from him.

One day I too will flare up and be gone. Like Emeraldine Morrow, whose withered heart dropped in a lake.

For now, all is lovely. All is well. It cannot be otherwise. Aquaflora. Stinking water from those stagnant flowers.

I have only had ten years of it. One was enough.

What will bring *me* the explosion of release, and let Lizzie from her prison of interminable, heavenly joy?

For me, as for all of them, perhaps, though quite unfelt, it is that last being freed from a Pandora's box of human truth. *Exasperation.*

THE RENFIELDS
by Christopher Lee Walters

illustrated by George Barr

The ambulance streaks by below, sirens screaming, grey-black wheels pushing it down tonight's established route of panic. For a second the five of us glimmer in the red and blue and white; now we're fresh victims in the bruised light, then as pale and washed out as ghosts, now dripping crimson, like demons. Only Tia's cigarette remains constant, its tiny end flaring as she inhales. So we stand there on the closed overpass with garbage and rusting car bones at our feet, flickering between the dying, the dead, and the damned, until the poor vehicle is swallowed by the south end of Abbey Tunnel underneath us.

Tia blows jets of white smoke from her nose like a dragon, then pushes her cigarette through a diamond of chain-linked fence. Antonio leans out from the overpass railing where the fence is broken and whoops when the flowing butt strikes the windshield of a small car leaving the tunnel. Christian grabs him by the neck and pulls him back. Moon, the other girl in our group, moves closer to me and we watch silently. Christian's eyes are fiery tonight; he slowly works his lips in a half-pout, as if he's chewing something. He starts to scold Antonio but seems to lose interest and turns away to stare at the procession of tail- and head-lights below. Tia slides behind Christian and folds her arms on his narrow shoulders. Moon and I exchange glances like husband and wife.

"So what do you wanna do tonight, Christian?" Tia asks him seductively, her voice like oiled leather.

Moon steps forward so the light from below can crawl over her face. Even now she looks shadowed, her cartoon-sized eyes black and glitterless. "How about Seizure?" she offers. Christian shakes his head, despite Antonio's sudden excitement — there's a dancer there he's "sweet" for, to quote Christian.

"Nahhh ..." A fly he's been twitching away lands on Tia's elbow and his hand snaps up like a trap to crush it. Tia flinches but says nothing, moves slowly to wipe off its remains.

He turns to face us and she melts from him into the grimed shadows. The night glows behind him, giving him an aura a yard wide on all sides. His face is a black hole in the center. "Tonight," he drawls slowly, so that his voice seems to rumble underneath us like the cars in the tunnel, "Tonight I think I want a man..."

"Ahhh, *shit*," mutters Antonio. Moon grabs his hand and we follow Christian to the rotting pipes we use to climb up and down from here.

Christian's not like the rest of us. I don't know if he's a vampire or not, which is what he's told us all before, and why we follow him faithfully around the city committing and hiding our acts of love. He might be the Devil, though. He sees things, knows them before the rest of us. My last girlfriend, Dana, before I took her for him, said he was good at reading people, at figuring out their secrets. She said he'd have been a good mountebank about a hundred or so years ago. But by then I was already ignoring her. I asked Christian later what mountebanks were and he said the grandfathers of bunkshooters, which didn't clear things up much. But she was right; he *can* read people. And he knows when people don't trust him so I always do.

The bar is called Dorothy's, like in *The Wizard of Oz*, and the dance-floor used to be in a blue and white checkerboard design before all the feet scuffed the paint away. As gay bars go it's pretty sincere; it even has rooms in the back, despite all the danger nowadays. That's why Christian picked it to be sure — he likes things that remind him of the past, leftovers of previous decades. Tonight it's filled to capacity and we have to elbow our way single file to the bar. Someone feels my ass and I turn and kidney-punch him. At least I think it's the same man. But it does the trick, and no one else acts like they notice me.

By the time we reach the bar, Christian has left us; and before we finish our second round of drinks he has returned, face ruddy and a squiggle of blood lacing his chin. Moon signs this to him and he wipes it away.

"Can we go now?" Antonio asks a little too anxiously. Antonio's tall and muscular and wears tight, fringed clothing, like a disco cowboy. His shoulder-length blond hair frames high cheeks and green eyes. He gets noticed a lot in places like this and he's uncomfortable.

"Aren't you having fun yet?" yells Christian across the din.

Antonio shouldn't have spoken, I think to myself as I drink, I've learned to keep my eyes down and act bored when we go out, especially if Christian is in a mood, unless it's my turn to pick someone.

Antonio's not as swift. He looks enviously at Moon and Tia, who are sitting at the other end of the table with their arms curved loosely around each other, and decides to choose the direct approach. "No."

It's the wrong choice. Christian leers and his mouth is red like an open wound. "Tough shit, handsome!" he shouts. Then he leans closer and Antonio seems pulled by an unseen force to his face. Christian says something to Antonio that I can't make out, and Antonio blushes. Christian leans back and folds his hands behind his head.

"I think Tony here feels a great love for me, for all of us, don't you?" It's not clear if he's asking us or Antonio, who's keeping his eyes locked on his drink. Christian continues: "I think he feels like expressing his love. Like a faithful acolyte. Don't you?"

He empties Antonio's glass into mine and the beers froth like saliva, and then with a sudden brutality smashes it to the table. Wet diamonds sliver across the wood and I feel tiny pinpricks on my hands, like

rain in a hard wind. I look around — as usual, no one seems to notice.

Christian idly fingers the glass, moving the shards away until only a large, mean-looking piece remains before Antonio. Christian spins it and it stops with the point glittering in Antonio's direction.

"Prove it to me, Tony. Cut yourself."

Antonio stays motionless for several minutes and I notice the smell of locker room. His face beads with sweat, mimics the play of light on the wet and messy table.

Christian watches him like a snake. Finally Antonio brings a trembling hand to the table and gingerly lifts the shard. The light bounces across the edges as it shakes. He places his other hand on the table and moves the glass towards it until the point indents his flesh. I look at Moon and Tia, whose faces betray the relaxed muscles of their bodies.

Christian growls, "Nooooo," and this time we all hear it despite the noise. Antonio freezes again. "Not good enough," Christian says. "Your throat. Cut your throat."

"That could kill him!" protests Tia. Again Antonio does not move. I realize I'm not breathing and force myself to look away.

"Or," says Christian, the tone of his voice releasing us as if he had removed handcuffs, "or you can cut someone else's neck. I'll accept a sacrifice from one of these fine young men —" His hand sweeps the bar. "—if it's by your loving hand."

Immediately Antonio stands, the shard of glass falling away from sight beneath the table. He is angry, I can tell. Christian laughs as Antonio strides off. "You gotta quit thinking of yourself as one of *them!*" Christian yells after Antonio. "They're just meat!"

Antonio is swallowed, fringes last, by the crowd of men. Tia and Moon separate, and Moon gets up to get us more drinks.

I sneak a glance at Christian and his eyes catch mine. I look away, then look back.

"You have to be ready to help yourself if you want me to help you," he tells me. His eyes look almost sad. I try to match his expression and glance back in the direction of Antonio. Of course Christian's right; if we can't deal with murder now, how will we be able to accept it when it's a necessity?

The thing is, I say in my head, hoping he can hear, *I am. I would have cut my throat.*



I discover I'm not breathing again and look back at Christian. He smiles at me and I feel lightheaded, the way I always felt the first few weeks I knew him.

There is a scream, high and child-like, from the back of the building. The clubnoise shifts like a piece of music and takes on tense, panicked undertones. I look questioningly at Christian and he shakes his head. Of course not — he never leaves the bodies. *Antonio.*

Before I realize it, I'm standing and Tia is already halfway to the door. We've been through this a hundred times in theory, like children drilling for imaginary fires, and we know the most important goal now is Escape. Moon pulls me with her and we jostle through the mass. I lose sight of Christian and finally see him as we go through the door—he's moving on the flaking dance floor with a very drunk, very short young man.

"Did you see him?" I ask Moon incredulously on the street. Tia is still ahead of us, and she slows to light a cigarette.

"In the mouth of the beast," Moon says softly. She moves ahead to Tia and I watch her walk. I try to

imagine what she'll be like as an undead. So calm, so quiet, black hair long and straight; she's like an Indian princess or an Egyptian bride. She could easily be a model, I hear her mother saying. I see her more as an owl, or a hawk — nothing escapes her.

"Where's Christian?" Tia asks us.

"Still inside," I tell her.

She snorts. "He won't let Tony drown in there. He ought to, though. Stupid son of a bitch." She ashes viciously.

"He could tell on the rest of us," Moon reminds her.

We are silent then, sobered, shocked once again into realizing how unnatural our lives are. *This isn't normal*, I tell myself for the thousandth time. *None of this is. We're killing complete strangers* —

But the image of the first time he told me, his fangs dripping saliva and his hands clawing like a salesman's into my shoulders, wells up in my eyes.

You can join me, he whispers. *You can be one of us*. Tia's hoarse giggle behind him, starting and stopping like a car backfiring into crushed velvet. My mind, frozen by the sheer impossibility of him, forgets my body and I begin trembling.

Prove you love me and I'll make you one of us. Be my soldier. How long have you wanted this ?

His smile is all needles, his eyes hold me like searchlights. "All my life," I whisper. *Oh God, it's the only thing that I ever wanted.*" *I believe him completely, reject my doubts and fall down, my tears multiplying him in the corners of my vision ...*

No, this isn't normal. But if Christian were crazy, he wouldn't be able to read minds like he does. If he were mortal he'd have surely been dead or arrested by now. He might not be a vampire, but I still have my hopes. Otherwise he'd be something worse.

He shows up from the opposite direction of the club, Antonio sheepishly following him like a beaten dog. There is blood all over Antonio's face, his shirt, his jacket.

"You botched the job, fucker." Tia spits on him when he is close enough. "You'll get us all caught —"

Christian slaps her. She quickly recovers and apologizes. He ignores her and jerks a thumb at Antonio. "We need to get him cleaned up," Christian says.

"My apartment," offers Moon. I turn to look at Antonio as we start walking: his eyes are far away and dazed.

"He looks pretty shaken," I whisper to Tia, who is closest.

"I don't know why," she mutters. "He's done this before." Silence for several blocks. Then, even more quietly, "At least I always *thought* he had — have you ever actually seen him kill, or has he always just gone off like that?"

Christian glares at us and we are silent the rest of the way.

The next evening we meet on the rooftop of the condemned Clairent Hotel. The climb is hard and I'm breathing heavily when we reach the top; Tia's scraped herself on something rusty and is cursing, licking the wound between invectives. I think gratefully how much all this will change after the gift.

Christian, as usual, appears from seemingly nowhere. There is a noticeable absence, but no one asks about Antonio, and Christian doesn't offer.

"Tonight we'll go to Seizure," he tells us. He looks appraisingly at Moon and Tia, and nods his approval. "Both of you," he tells them, "tonight. Do this well for me and I'll know you're ready." He sees my face as we head for the fire escape and gives me a reassuring pat.

"Don't worry," he says so only I hear. "I won't forget you."

Seizure: flashing lights, heavy bass double-beating like the club's heart, smoky haze, smell of sweat, beer, fog-machine. The people here are leftovers; they dress like 1985-Underground, everything a shade of black, and steal glances at us when we enter. Rumors of our small group have started to spread, I'm certain; but our clothes are what draw the attention — by comparison we look like gypsies, like the Village People gone co-ed.

Tia walks like a cat in her dullest moments, and tonight she is supremely feline. The eyes of men in the bar follow her as she passes, and those who can break the spell are caught again by the brown velvet luxuriance of Moon in the doorway. Tia runs a finger over a stranger's shoulder and tastes it as if he were icing. Like Moon, she has a knack for it, and she's set out to prove herself to Christian once and for all. The man's eyes are glued to her the rest of the evening, and she ignores him the way an aristocrat would.

Two girls, both younger than I, smile nervously, unaware they are imitating one another. I stare back and let a sly grin wriggle across my lips like a centipede before I look away. Their faces are filed away in my head, in case I have a chance later tonight to go after one. Or both.

I go to get drinks and a tall woman with short hair and almost no clothes stops me — she's one of the cage dancers, Antonio's "girl." She quizzes me and I feign ignorance, and then push by her as she calls me

names. I add her to my short list, telling myself I'm doing Antonio a favor. When I come back Moon is gone; she's dancing with a stocky, pink-scrubbed young man with no hair. *She's got one*, I think. Tia's nowhere to be seen.

"You sure you don't want me to do one tonight, Christian?" I've never asked like this before and the question spurts out before I can control myself. But Antonio's failure worries me, makes me understand how Christian might wonder if we've all been tainted by his inadequacy. Like Tia I'm burning to prove myself.

"Maybe," he says. He squints against the music Christian doesn't like music at all, I drink and wait.

When Tia returns she doesn't come to our table; instead she walks past us towards the door. Her stride is even more animal-like, if such a thing is possible, and she languidly rolls her head one time around her neck as if to stretch it. At the bar a man drunkenly grabs for her hand, and she relents and leans in to him with half-closed eyes. They kiss. When she pulls away he licks his lips and furrows his brows quizzically as he tries to place the faint taste of copper on his tongue. She reaches the door — a rectangle of bluish light from outside widens and then narrows again, and she is gone.

"Wait for Moon," Christian orders me. He follows Tia to the door and it swallows him too.

Moon almost instantly appears by my side, making me jump. "You're getting really good at that sort of thing," I tell her. She smiles, and her teeth are outlined in red, as if she has been eating candy.

"Where's Christian?"

"Outside. With Tia."

Her expression is suddenly opaque. "Oh." She takes a gulp of my drink and shudders. "Well, let's go," she says finally.

Christian is draped over Tia in the alley across the street from Seizure's door. For a second I think, *Oh my God he's finally doing it* and then Moon calls out and the two of them convulse and jerk away from each others like sixth graders caught behind the school. We cross the asphalt to them; Tia stays in the shadows of the dumpsters, adjusting herself. Christian wipes his face and moves out into the light. There is red on his mouth but it's mostly lipstick. Moon and I stare — what is there to say?

"Did you do it?" he finally asks her, his temper bleeding through in the tone and rhythm. Moon nods and then, as if this were normal procedure, removes two Polaroids from her purse. She extends them to Christian, who snatches them away and concentrates for maybe twenty seconds on each one. Then he looks up at her.

"What the fuck did you do with his body?" he spits out at her.

"Oh, they'll find him, but not for a week or so. Maybe longer. He's wrapped in plastic in the ceiling of the old bathroom that doesn't work." Christian's face doesn't change. "The one where everyone goes to buy their drugs"

"I know where you mean." He looks down at the pictures again. I stare like a child at Moon's small black purse, trying to imagine how she must have planned, how she always must plan for these things. I wonder what else she has inside there — knives? Rubber gloves? Rope? Christian hands back the pictures and she returns them to the bag.

Tia at last moves from the shadows. Her pantyhose is torn on her left thigh, above and to the side of her kneecap. The white circle of flesh looks like a drop of paint on her leg in the streetlamp's two-dimensional light. Moon stares at her but her expression is again opaque. Tia mimics and returns it.

More silence. Disappointment and envy volt through my limbs. I weigh the pros and cons of simply asking if I can go back inside and am about to open my mouth when Christian clears his throat. "Follow me," he says, and he starts walking south towards the bay.

From behind us comes the crescendo of boots, and there is a sudden thud as Christian stumbles forward with a gasp. Antonio is hunched over, panting, eyes gleaming. His face is red and his hair stands out like a mane.

"You sorry fuck!" he bellows at Christian, who is stumbling around, face twisted with pain. "You LIAR!"



Christian makes a barking noise at Antonio and lunges for him. They fall backward and Tia screams.

"You *lied* to me! You shit! You can't do anything!" Antonio's voice comes in and out as they roll around, punching the street and each other. Finally Antonio scrambles back on hands and feet and Christian slowly stands, seeming to tower above us all. I blink and he's at his normal height, an inch or so below me.

There is blood on his lip. His own.

"You're not anything. Fuckin' coward." Antonio is almost crying, and he sits up, then stands, stomach heavy. The three of us watch silently, confused. I wonder why Christian is letting him go this far, why he hasn't simply killed him and ended it. Even Tia, strangely enough, hasn't moved since her scream.

Antonio rubs his jaw and looks at his bleeding knuckles. "Fraud," he says softly.

"You're not welcome with me any longer," Christian states in a grand manner. Antonio snorts. "You've proved unworthy of—"

"FUCK YOU!" Antonio shouts. His anger is building up again, I can see muscles knot in his bare arms. "You're crazy! You're like a little Napoleon! Man, I *killed* someone last night for you and — Jesus! You don't even know what you're talking about!"

"It was the first time," Tia says in amazement.

"Leave," says Christian.

Antonio is feeling more confident. "What are those, caps? Did you bond your teeth? Huh? How many times have you cut yourself in a bathroom stall just to smear a little blood on your lips to scare us? Huh? Fucking trick or treat!" He moves towards us, arms curved out from his torso, fists locking and unlocking.

Christian doesn't turn, but I know his next words are directed at me as surely as if he were leaning into my ear.

"What's the Golden Rule?" he asks.

"No witnesses," I say tonelessly. *My test. This is my test.*

"Break it," he says.

I hesitate only long enough for Antonio to understand, and when his expression changes to fear and he starts to move back I am on him like a wolf, biting his face because I have no weapons. He claws at me and kicks and there is a silent compression in my gut as his knee strikes. My vision dims, then sparkles. We both make wordless sounds. I go at him again, this time with fists, and after a moment he has thrown me into the wall. Pain swells shamefully around me like a body bag.

Christian attacks again. I look sideways at Moon and Tia and see them at a distance, wide-eyed and lost. Behind them a light comes on in a third or fourth-story window.

wrong failed wrong

When Antonio finally knocks Christian down I see the blood decorating Antonio like war medals. He isn't losing, but he's suffering. There is only fear in him now.

Christian is dragging himself away, not looking up. Antonio staggers after him. Silently, almost apologetically, Tia moves in and, with a precision I don't immediately grasp, slides her knife into Antonio's back. He screams, and that scream expands like a steam whistle against the metal and brick and glass, finally dissolving in the night air. He starts to turn and she punches him twice, pushing him to the

ground and cutting his neck. His jugular sings vacantly, spilling black into the street. She locks her head and he heaves, vomiting.

I push myself up and look for the others. Moon has disappeared, but Christian is standing on the other side of Tia and Antonio and grinning madly. He nods to me and opens his arms. "THIS," he yells out, "is FAITH! This is a SOLDIER!"

Antonio's kicks grow weaker and weaker. The pavement around them glistens wetly. Tia, hands slick with blood and stomach juices, is gasping between mouthfuls; and my stomach begins to feel spongy, hollow. I've been here before, felt the ragged warm skin swell into my mouth as I sucked, fought the nausea of drinking someone to death with thoughts of romance and eternity, images of Christian. This scene isn't new but the point of view is, and no amount of imagination can dilute my uneasy perspective. There's a horror to it, a viciousness that wasn't there before.

"Tia?" I call out.

She looks up at me with rabid eyes and I freeze, suddenly cold. She's as close to a monster as I've seen any of us, even Christian. He walks up behind her and touches her head; and she screams and spins around, droplets flying from her face, her knife whirring through the air.

Christian flinches and holds his arm; inky blood wells up in the crevices between his elbow and the hand supporting it and runs in a thin stream to the street. Tia laughs, but not her usual laugh, and I begin to back up.

"You are a fucking fraud, aren't you?" She hisses her words through wet lips. Christian stands motionless, silently eying her. She cocks her head to one side. "Why didn't you stop him? Why didn't you stop me?" The knife winks as she moves it up between them.

Slowly, as if he's learning how, Christian's face begins to contort into a grin. Tia stops, confused. Christian begins to chuckle, his lips still pressed together; and then the laughter bursts out like a stampede and fills the air between them. Tia weathers it without flinching and finally presses the tip of her knife to his neck. He grows silent again.

"Why?" she asks him.

"You're still going to be Tia when you're a vampire, you know." His voice is soft and low now. "Nothing changes, really. You'll still have the same parents. The same childhood. You'll still be poor. You'll still be lonely."

"I don't care!" she screams. Her whole body shakes with the force of her voice.

"It's not like Bram Stoker, or Anne Rice, or Catherine Deneuve, or Carmilla. Or Bela Lugosi. Or Countess Bathory. Or even Vlad. It's just you. Only less."

"I don't care," she says again. Her voice is uneven.

"You'll still have been molested, you know." His voice is so warm now that he sounds like a father, all-forgiving. "You'll still have to deal with your hate. You'll still have had the abortion. The addictions don't go away, you know; they just change."

The knife is no longer dimpling his flesh. Tia is quietly sobbing, her tears blending seamlessly into the blood still wet on her face. "Please shut up," she cries. "This is all I want."

"Nothing changes," he repeats.

"I'll do anything. *Anything*. I've given up my whole life for this. Please."

There are police sirens about ten blocks away; I can barely hear them behind the buildings.

Christian surprises me then — he moves forward and holds her, his shoulder growing messy from the blood smeared across her face. She drops the knife to her feet, and her savagery falls away with it as she cries. The visual effect is ironic — they look as if he's just saved her from a deranged murderer.

The sirens grow louder. "We need to go," I call out, my voice sounding small and feeble.

Tia looks up, blinking stupidly. "What'll you do with the body?" she asks Christian.

He smiles. "There's nothing we can do," he says.

"Let's go," I say. "C'mon." The pain in my lower back is fading as my adrenaline starts coursing again.

Christian continues to hold Tia. She finally pushes him away but he refuses to release her. When she pries at his arms he tightens them, wincing at the pain in his elbow.

"Christian, what are you doing?" Tia's voice is high and panicked now.

He looks at me over her shoulder. "You'd better go," he warns. "They're gonna comb this whole place once she starts talking."

Tia is kicking and screaming now but Christian is immobile, granite-like. His flesh doesn't even seem to indent when her fingers claw at him. I back into an alley but don't turn away from them yet.

"They'll arrest me!" she screams. She struggles in his arms like a drowning swimmer. "My God, they'll kill me! They'll lock me up for the rest of my life!"

"The shorter, the better," he coos.

I should say something, do something...

"You've . . . Done . . . Enough!" he calls out to me over Tia's noise. The words are over-emphasized, dramatically spoken; I can't tell if he's being sarcastic or emotional. Either way, I feel ashamed.

Tia's screams fade as the sirens increase, and then both diminish behind me as I cross the city. When I get home, it's almost sunrise.

What little faith in Christian I still have, covering me like a residue from the night before, flakes off as I watch the television next evening: an image of Christian and Tia, bathed in sunlight, handcuffed, being led to and then from a building somewhere in the city. Flashes exploding all around them and the roar of reporters no different from the unending club noise, only tinnier-sounding on the speaker. I don't hear the words of the newscaster, but I can imagine what he's saying. I curse Tia again and wipe my eyes.

Moon doesn't knock on my door. It's locked, in fact; but she manages to get in anyway and is sitting across from me almost before I'm aware of it. I try to ignore her and she unplugs the television.

"We should've called him Judas when we chose names," she says to me.

I stare at her, not comprehending.

"Antonio," she explains. "If anyone betrayed us it was Antonio."

I start to argue with her but realize how foolish I'll sound, comparing Christian to old legends and fictional rules. I remember his words from the night before, what he said to Tia.

"They'll come to arrest us, you know," I tell her.

"Yeah, I know." She sighs. "He wasn't stupid. He knew who to pick, how to get a group together that would self-destruct without him." She cocks an eyebrow at me. "I suppose you're thinking about killing yourself, huh?"

I don't respond, my face reddening.

She smiles. "Thought so. You will too, I bet. I was going to ask you to come with me but I don't think so."

"I would've cut my throat for him," I say out loud, but not really to her. "I told him that."

"You *did* cut your throat, for all practical purposes. How many bodies have you left rotting around this city? Thinking in a month or so it wouldn't matter if they found your fingerprints?"

She drums her fingers on the dirty floor beside her. "Quit thinking about it. There was probably nothing any of us could have done. He worked us like morphine, like a sedative — how do you resist a promise like that?"



My eyes are blurry and wet. "Then we were just idiots? Blind?"

Moon digs though her small purse and withdraws a makeup case. She begins to shade her eyelids; she plays with herself like this whenever she wants to think, I've noticed.

"Let's say he *was* the Devil, a devil," she says slowly, one eye softly closed. "He was still here to test our faith. He wasn't lying, not really." She blinks and does the other eye.

"What if he wasn't anything like that at all? What if he was just a crazed psycho playing around with us — manipulating us?"

"Whether he was anything or not, we were still tested, weren't we?" She drops the case back into her purse and begins to edge her full lips with a brush. When she finishes she stares at me. "Weren't we?"

I don't say anything, which is as good an agreement as any.

She closes her purse and stands, clears her throat as if she's about to give a speech. "I grew up believing in Church," she says, "In God and the Devil. In the American Dream. Nothing's changed,

really — sin is sin, and if you try hard enough you can be anything you want." She stands. "Tia and Antonio failed. I haven't, not yet."

I watch her feet pass by. "I'm not giving up," she says from somewhere high above.

"I don't think it's your choice," I say sadly.

There isn't much else to say, and after a moment she leaves without a goodbye.

When I finally fall asleep, after throwing up a pint
of bourbon, I dream of Hell over and over, shimmering
through a haze of Moon's ashes in the distance like the
promised land.

Q

THE GAME

by Melanie Tern

illustrated by Allen Koszowski

My father died last night. I know; I was there. I'm glad he's dead, but I'm going to miss him terribly.

We had what you might call a complex relationship. It was never abuse. No one could call it assault. What my father did to me all my life — and what, classically, my mother could not or would not protect me from — was never, by the letter of the law and probably not by its spirit, actionable. It was all in fun. No beating or burning, no lasting injury, no marks; my Daddy wouldn't do that to me.

And I wouldn't do that to him, either, once he got old and frail and dependent on me. I wouldn't hurt him in ways that anyone else would notice, or so that anyone, least of all him or me, would be forced to call it by its name. That would be too easy.

"Daughter! I'm thirsty!" His voice, once so playful and gentle and mean, had turned wimpy and clotted now, like stuffing leaking out of an old chair. He hadn't called me by my name since I was fourteen and had asked him to, had sulked and stormed and tried my ineffective best to insist. Dutifully, I went to get him a glass of water.

One of my earliest memories is of Daddy throwing me into the air and catching me, big hands hard under my arms. Over and over and over again.

At first it may have been fun. Then it wasn't. I was scared. I was dizzy. I wanted him to stop. I shrieked and kicked at him and twisted in midair until, I realize now, he probably almost dropped me and it would have been my fault.

My Daddy was big and strong and sure of himself, though, and I trusted him not to do that. He always caught me, and then he always tossed me into the air again. By the time he let the game be over, I was hysterical.

Then he'd hold me too tightly — to all appearances comforting me, maybe even intending to comfort me although I doubt it — while I sobbed and struggled to get free. Murmuring to me, "It's all right. It's okay, honey," he'd announce over my head to my mother, who had affected a perpetually and ineffectually worried stance. "We were just playing. She was enjoying herself. I don't know what happened."

Doing his bidding on what turned out to be his last day alive, I dropped two ice cubes into my father's glass and filled it with cold water from the pitcher I kept for him in the refrigerator.

I suppose I could get rid of that pitcher now; it's always in the way when I want something from the top shelf.

When I had just been learning to walk, he'd push me down. Never hard enough to hurt me; always, carefully, onto carpet or grass. Just a little shove to my shoulder and I'd tip over backwards, landing with my legs straight out in front of me, unable to get back up by myself. Sometimes I'd giggle. More often I'd cry. It didn't matter what I did. He would help me up when he was ready to, taking me gently around the waist and setting me on my own two feet again, or holding out his index fingers for me to clutch. Then later — never once did I see him coming — he'd nudge me again and grin as I collapsed at his feet.

I'd been a long time learning to walk. But once I had, I'd been agile, quick, and strong. I'd learned to stay out of my father's way and, at the same time, to position myself to make him stumble against a wall or trip over a threshold.

"Here's your water, Daddy."

"Thanks." Warily, he put out both hands to take the glass.

Quick as a rubber snake striking when you press a disguised button, I threw water on him. Not the whole glassful; that would be crass, and in his frail condition might make him sick. But enough to surprise him, to leave him damp and cold. An ice cube slid down inside the collar of his pajamas.

He grimaced and flapped his hands, like a bit out of a Marx Brothers routine, and gave a ragged yelp. It made me laugh. I stood over him and chortled for a moment or two before I hurried off to get him a towel, dry pajamas, and another glass of ice water. This one I planned to let him drink. It wouldn't do to pull the same trick too often; he'd taught me that half the fun was in keeping the victim guessing.

Growing up, I never had known what to expect; my father was accomplished. The older I got the more concertedly I'd tried to outwit him, but it hadn't often worked. I'd taunt him. Sometimes I could brush right past him and he wouldn't seem to notice me. Some-times he'd smile in an affectionate, fatherly way and maybe tousle my hair.

Sometimes he'd grab me in what was supposed to pass for a hug, and then wouldn't let me go. He'd hold me just snugly enough that I couldn't get loose and he'd go on with whatever he'd been doing — reading the paper, cooking spaghetti, chatting with my mother who by this time would be looking even

more distracted and helpless than usual.

I'd squirm and complain. "*Dad-dy!*"

"What?" He'd clown, pooching out his lips. "What? What's the matter with my little girl?"

"I want *down!*"

"You want what?"

"*I want down!*"

"*You want down!* Why?"

There'd never been a reason good enough. I'd had no control whatsoever over when he finally set me down. When he'd decided to, whatever his whim, he'd loosen his embrace and I'd run away, feeling beaten again and determined to get him next time. Next time had been a long time coming.

But soon I'd be strolling past him again, flirting, teasing, daring. Closer and closer, just to see what would happen. Sometimes nothing had. Sometimes he'd capture me and tickle me till I'd get sick to my stomach. "See?" he'd defend himself to my mother, who'd be watching us with her arms folded across her stomach as if to protect herself. "She likes it. It's a game."

We'd be lying on the living room floor companionably watching television, and without warning he'd lunge at me and flip me over onto my back so he could use my belly for a pillow. "Daddy! Quit!"

"Quit what?" he'd ask sweetly. His voice would be muffled, his beard prickly against my bared skin. "I like it here."

"I wanna see the end of the movie!"

"You do?" He'd pin me there until the credits rolled up the screen. Then he'd kiss me and effortlessly let me go.

When I'd worn shorts that rode a little too low on my hips, he'd sneak his hands around me from behind and poke his finger into my belly button. I'd loathed that. I'd told him so, sometimes patiently, often at the top of my lungs. But I'd frequently worn my shorts that way, and made sure he saw.

I'd pester him — untie his shoestrings, dribble grass into his coffee — until he'd come after me with a playful bellowing. Then I'd shout and cry in outrage while he held me down and licked me all over with such sloppy thoroughness that I'd thought I'd throw up. I'd wished I would; that'd show him. "Daddy! Stop it!"

"Stop what?"

"Stop it! It's gross!" And eventually, when he'd been good and ready, he had, but not because I'd wanted him to.

Once in a while when he had come in to kiss me good-night — often enough that I'd always been on guard until he'd been safely out of my room—he'd flop down beside me in my bed and I'd be powerless to get him up. For the first few seconds it would feel nice, and I'd snuggle against him. But then I'd want him out of my bed, and it was *my* bed, and nothing I could do would budge him. By the time he'd left, in his own good time, I'd be furious and my nerves jangled, and I'd have dreams about being trapped or tied.

Sometimes, too, the perfect sweet revenge would come to me in a dream.

"Daughter," my father whined last night, unsteadily holding out his glass and watching me with his crafty old eyes. "More water."

"More water?" I poached my lips at him. "You want more water? Why?" "I'm *thirsty*." "You're *thirsty*?"

"Please bring me another glass of water." "No," I said, with mock reasonableness, taking the glass from him. "It's almost time for dinner."

As my father and I had both aged, the balance of power between us had shifted. I'd started to win more often and suffer less retaliation. But he'd remained a worthy opponent. His mind, though fuzzy a lot of the time, had stayed clever, and he'd retained more physical strength and agility than he let on.

I'm positive, for instance, that sometimes he got up in the night and rearranged or outright hid things in the kitchen; many a morning I couldn't find the spatula or the cord to the coffeepot. I didn't give him the satisfaction of complaining. I just made do, and eventually the missing items showed up or were mysteriously replaced. I suppose now everything will stay where I put it.

He also used to collect the mail before I realized it had come, and he'd hide the phone bill or the disconnect notice from the power company. The challenge was whether I could keep track of the dates the bills were supposed to arrive. Of course, if they'd ever turned off our power or phone, he'd have suffered as much as me. The game had acquired a curious and exciting double edge.

I'd barely started fixing supper last night when he called me again. I took longer than necessary to go to him, first making sure the lid on the pot of potatoes was tipped so the water wouldn't boil over. I left the skins on to preserve some of the food value. Daddy could chew potato skins so it wasn't dangerous, but he didn't like them.

"Yes, Daddy." I stood respectfully before him with my hands folded, waiting for his instructions. "It's time for the news."

I nodded and turned on his television. He had a remote control but wouldn't use it because he liked me to wait on him. I suspected he was also titillated by the risk: the more things I did for him, the more opportunity I had to play a trick.

My father and I understood each other. We were very close. I wonder now how my life will be without him.

"Channel 9." He always said that.

I turned the channel selector to 7 and left it there. It took him only a split-second to realize what I'd done, and he was howling before I got out of the room. I chuckled all the way down the stairs. That was a good one. Even now, thinking about it makes me laugh, in a sad kind of way.

"Daddy, what makes a rainbow?"

Without missing a beat: "Birds go to the bathroom in different colors."

"Oh, Daddy."

"It's true. Robins make red, bluejays make blue, canaries make yellow, parrots make green"

I don't remember ever getting a straight answer from him to a question like that, and it had been particularly infuriating because I'd known he knew; he'd had information I'd wanted, and he wouldn't give it to me. I'd believed everything he'd said, and at the same time I hadn't believed a word. By the time he actually had deigned to tell me the truth, I'd never known whether to believe that, either. Sometimes my mother would intercede and try to give me accurate information, but I really hadn't wanted her to.

In high school, Daddy would help me with my algebra and geometry homework. He'd been a smart man and a good teacher. I'd learned from him better than from any of the teachers at school.

I hadn't been able to trust him, though. Sometimes he'd feed me the wrong answers, or tell me I'd worked a problem wrong when I hadn't. I'd learned to check the work myself, and to be able to defend what I'd done, and for that reason I'd got straight A's in algebra and geometry.

On the other hand, I still have nightmares. A whole semester's worth of equations or proofs with every one mysteriously wrong. Rules that fluctuate even as I write them down.

"Daughter!" There was something different about his voice that last time he called me yesterday; I knew instantly that this was serious. "My pill!" he croaked.

Out of old habit, my mind was spinning out ways to fool him even as I raced for his room. I could give him vitamins instead of the medicine. I could pretend to drop the last pill and make him think I couldn't find it.

Once again, my father beat me to it. When I stepped onto the landing outside his room, my feet went out from under me. I heard a cascade of taps and rattles as whatever he'd strewn on the steps — marbles, maybe; they make for terrific pratfalls — rolled, bounced, and scattered. I grabbed for the railing and missed. My leg twisted out from under me, and I heard the snap of my ankle before I felt the pain. "Daddy!" I cried.

From where I lay crumpled outside his door, I could clearly see into the room. My father was on the floor, blue-faced, fists to his chest. Unwillingly, I considered the possibility that this was not a joke. Which was worse: to take seriously a false alarm and be made a fool of by my father, again, or to assume he was pulling a fast one when he wasn't?

I tried to drag myself toward him, but I'd hurt my wrist in the fall, too, and it wouldn't support my weight. My elbow came down hard on a marble, right on the point of the funny bone, and my whole forearm blazed with pain before it went numb. My father called me. I hobbled on my knees as fast as I could, terrified and thinking how silly we must look. He was doubled over now, clutching his chest and wheezing, and I stifled a laugh as desperately I flung myself past him and yanked open the nightstand drawer where his medicine was always kept.

It wasn't there. I shoved my fingers into the back corners, slid the side of my hand along the edges. It was empty.

Then I remembered that the night before I'd palmed the pill bottle into the pocket of my bathrobe, happily anticipating the look of shock and horror on his face when he checked for it in his obsessive way and couldn't find it. My bathrobe was in the laundry room in the basement.

For a moment, delight won out over fear and pain. I may have laughed aloud. This was a *great* trick: I couldn't walk. The pills were down two long flights of stairs. And my father, whose heart had allegedly been on the brink of stopping for so many years that I had come to suspect the doctor of collaborating in a ruse, was now having a heart attack in front of me. Maybe.

Propped against the wall with my broken and now swelling ankle stretched out in front of me at an odd

angle, I sat and watched him. The thought crossed my mind that he wouldn't know whether *I* was tricking *him* — maybe I had on an inflatable flesh-colored stocking; maybe I could walk if I wanted to.

He was moaning and gagging and gasping, "Daughter!" It annoyed me, as he surely knew it would, that he still wouldn't use my name. Then he died.

When his thrashing and then his breathing stopped, I tried to tell myself he was faking. But when I couldn't find a pulse in his wrist or a heartbeat in his chest, I knew one of us had gone too far. I stared at him, furious and contrite, and then I struggled to my hands and knees and crawled frantically out of the room.

It was a doomed and self-indulgent gesture. My father was already dead. But I had it in my head that if I could find his medicine and sneak a few pills down his throat, I could somehow trick him into coming back to life. Putting weight on my shin, even horizontally across the floor, caused excruciating pain, and my wrist kept collapsing. I went downstairs headfirst, bracing myself against the banister, or scooting and sliding in clumsy sideways positions. But I didn't allow myself to pass out, or to pause and rest, or to think about what I was doing except to repeat like a mantra that I was doing this for my father.

In order to reach the knob on the basement door, I had to brace one hand on the floor and stretch.

My hip must have been hurt in the fall, too, or in the arduous journey downstairs, because it was throbbing. The knob turned almost freely in its socket, and with grudging admiration I visualized my father sneaking down here and loosening the screws. Finally I outwitted him and got the knob mechanism to catch enough to open the door. It swung toward me, into the kitchen, requiring an awkward series of hunching movements that made my whole leg and now my flank ache.

I didn't even try to reach the light switch. I maneuvered until I was sitting painfully on the top step, then took a deep breath, deliberately thought of Dad dead and winning upstairs, braced my uninjured hand on the step beside me, and started down.

The stairs were rickety. The basement was dark. Once, when I was six or seven, Daddy had locked me down here for most of a rainy summer afternoon — accidentally, of course.

I'd been more furious than frightened, more challenged than anything else. When he'd come looking for me, about supper time, I'd hidden in the furnace room, not emerging until long after I'd started hearing the real panic in his voice.

Now I heaved myself into the laundry room and tugged the robe out of the basket of clean clothes. The bottle of pills was not in either pocket. It must have fallen out in the washer or dryer. Both machines were top-loaders and towered over me. Repeatedly I tried to hoist myself up, and fell back every time. My entire left side was numb.

I heard the door at the top of the stairs shut and lock. I heard my father laugh. Outraged, I yelled, "Daddy! Stop it!" as I'd done so many other times in my life, knowing full well it wouldn't do any good. Even dead, he wasn't about to forfeit the game.

So I've been sprawled on the laundry room floor all night. Now and then I've heard his footsteps across the ceiling. I am virtually immobile by now, ankle and wrist swollen huge, head swimming, and I've drifted in and out of consciousness, but most of the time I've spent plotting revenge.

As of yet, I haven't come up with anything good. But I will, Daddy. I will. Q

On the Last Night of the Festival of the Dead

by Darrell Schweitzer illustrated by Stephen E. Fabian

"... then all things which have been begun shall be finished."

— *The Litanies of Silence.*

On the first night of the Festival of the Dead, they were laughing.

All the capital rang with mirth; fantastic banners and kites festooned the towers and roofs of the City of the Delta. The streets swarmed with masked harlequins bearing copper lanterns shaped like grotesque faces which *sang* through some trick of flame and metal. That was a kind of laughter too.

On the first night, Death was denied. Children crouched by the canals and floated away paper mummys in toy funeral-boats. Black-costumed skeletons ran from house to house, pounding on doors, waving torches, shouting for the living to emerge and mingle with the dead. Revelers swirled in their shrouds, their death-masks revealing their ancestors, not as they had looked at the close of life, but with rotten features hideously, hilariously distorted.

That was the joke of it, that everyone was masked and no one knew who anyone else was. All gossip and insult and roguery might be done with impunity. Nothing mattered. Death itself was a jest. Surat-Hemad, the crocodile-headed Devourer, god of the Underworld, could be mocked.

But it was nervous laughter. Inevitably, even on the first night of the festival, some of the restless dead actually returned from their abode in *Tashe*, that shadowy country which lies beyond the reach of the deepest dreams. So the possibility was always there, however remote, that the person behind the mask, either speaking or spoken to, might actually *be* a corpse.

If not something far stranger.

"Is this the house of the great Lord Kuthomes?" the person who had knocked at the door said, holding out a small package wrapped in palm fronds.

That was all the two servants who answered could remember: the soft voice, the diminutive messenger with long, dark hair; probably a child, gender uncertain. The mask like a barking dog, or grinning jackal, or maybe a bat. Plain, scruffy clothing, maybe loose trousers or just a robe; probably barefoot.

They'd merely accepted the package and the messenger ran away.

Their exasperated master took it from them and ordered them beaten.

Lord Kuthomes tore the fronds away and held in his hands a small wooden box, cheaply made of scrap materials, without any attempt at ornamentation.

The box vibrated slightly, as if something inside it were alive, or perhaps clockwork.

Thoughtful, ever on guard against the trick of some enemy — for he *was* a great lord of the Delta and he had many enemies — he carried it to his chamber. As he entered, living golden hands on his nightstand lifted a two-paneled mirror, holding it open like a book.

Kuthomes sat on a stool, a candle in one hand, the parcel in the other, gazing at the reflections of both in the black glass. The hands shifted the mirror, showing the image in one panel, then the other.

As he had so many times before, Kuthomes searched for some hidden clue which might reveal treachery or useful secrets. He was a magician of sorts, though not a true sorcerer, wholly transformed, reeking of poisonous enchantment. His art sufficed to unravel such lethal puzzles as one Deltan lord might design for another. In this mirror, he had often learned the weakness of some rival. Once he had even reached *through* the glass and torn out a sleeping man's heart.

He hefted the box. It weighed perhaps two ounces. But he had an instinct about such things. He sensed strangeness, and in strangeness, danger.

But when he held the box up to the mirror, even with the candle positioned to shine through the delicate wood, he saw only his hands, the box, and the candle's flame. The depths remained inscrutable; they did not even reflect Lord Kuthomes's silver-bearded face.

The box stirred, humming like one of those metal lanterns the harlequins carried. For an instant, Kuthomes was furious. A festival night *joke*? He would have crushed the thing in his hand and hurled it away. But that same caution which had made him a great lord of the Delta again prevailed.

He placed the object down on the night stand, took a delicate calligrapher's knife, and, by candlelight, began to chip away at the thin wood. There were no envenomed needles, no springs, no magic seals waiting to be broken. The fragments fell away easily.

Inside was a sculpture about two inches high, of a laughing corpse-face, its head thrown back, its gap-toothed mouth stretched wide. Inside the mouth, a tiny silver bell rang of its own accord. Kuthomes touched the bell with the tip of his knife and the ringing stopped.



Outside, the mob laughed and roared. Drums beat faintly, muffled, far away.

He laid the knife down on the table top, and the ringing resumed. It wasn't a matter of a breeze or a draught. He placed the whole object under a glass bowl and the bell still shivered.

He knew, then, that this was no thing of the living world, but a death-bell, manufactured in *Tashe* itself by dead hands, then borne up, like a bubble rising from a deep, muddy pool, through the dreamlands of *Leshe*, until it was present, very substantially, at the doorstep of Lord Kuthomes of the Delta. It was a token, a summons from the dead.

"Whoever has sent this," he said aloud, "know that I shall find you out and wrest your secrets from you, though you be already dead. You shall learn why Kuthomes is feared."

He rose and prepared himself, performing the four consecrations, forehead, eyelids, ears, and mouth touched with the Sorcerer's Balm, to shield him from illusion. His midnight-black sorcerer's robe came to life as it closed around him, its delicately glowing embroideries depicting a night sky never seen over the City of the Delta; the stars of Death, the sky of *Tashe*.

He regarded his reflection in the mirrors, only the robe visible in the darkness, like some headless specter.

The original owner of that robe, he recalled, had been headless toward the end, but well before he died, before others carried the remains away and finished the unpleasant, perilous business. He knew that to kill a sorcerer is to become one. The contagion flows from the slain to the slayer. Therefore a sorcerer must be disposed of carefully, by experts, not such dilettantes as he, who might occasionally require that the serpentine motif on a jade carving come to life on cue, or a sip of wine paralyze the will, or the face of a one man be temporarily transformed into that of the other. These were stock-in-trade for any lord of the Delta, to be applied as deftly as a surgeon's knife.

But no, he was not a sorcerer.

Therefore he also carried a curious sword in a scabbard underneath his robe, its strong steel blade inlaid with intricate, ultimately mystifying silver designs. It was the weapon of a Knight Inquisitor, one of those fanatic warriors from the barbarian lands across the sea, a sworn enemy of all gods but the Righteous Nine and especially of the Shadow Titans, who breathe sorcery like a miasma into the world. The sword was proof against all the magical darkness.

But Kuthomes, merely a man, had strangled the Knight Inquisitor with a cord, years ago, when he was younger and had the strength for such things.

He put on the jeweled, brimless cap of his rank and took up the death-bell in his hand, then passed silently through the halls of his own house in vigorous, graceful strides. He crossed the central courtyard. Up above, someone hastily closed a shutter. Even on such a merry night, it was ill luck to look on Lord Kuthomes in his sorcerer's aspect.

A single lamp flickered in the atrium. There were still palm fronds on the floor, and a stain where the servants had been beaten. That would be cleaned up on his return, or made larger.

He slipped out into the street.

By now the night was almost over. Stars still shone overhead, but the sky was purpling in the East. He found himself in an utterly dark street, without a single lantern hanging from a doorway, a channel of featureless exterior walls. Higher up, the balconies were empty, the shutters invariably locked.

He stretched out his palm and held the death-bell up level with his face.

It laughed at him, but slowly now, the faint tinkling interspersed with silence.

Several streets away, someone shouted. A horn blew a long, trailing blast that began as music and ended in flatulence. Something fell and broke, probably crockery. Then silence again.

He walked confidently along that dark street until he stumbled, cursing, over what looked like an enormous, long-legged bird left broken and sprawling.

But Kuthomes did not fall. He regained his footing, crushing the death-bell in his hand. The thing felt like a live wasp, scraping to get free. Hastily, he opened his hand, then stood still, gasping.

Gradually he made out an inert reveler in some absurd costume: trailing cloth wings, tatters and streamers, a crushed and shapeless mask. There must have been stilts somewhere, or else a crowd had carried the fool aloft.

In his younger days, Kuthomes might have given the fellow a kick to the ribs, but now he merely spat, then continued on his way.

He tried to follow the delicate voice of the bell, turning where it seemed to ring louder or more frequently. But his ear could not actually tell. He wandered through the maze of streets, once or twice passing others, who hurried to get out of his way.

In a market square, he faced the East. Dawn's first light sufficed to reveal the solitary figure standing there: very short, clad in shapeless white, arms akimbo, bare feet spread apart, face hidden behind some cheap animal mask.

"You there!" Kuthomes dropped the insistent bell into his pocket and stepped forward, but the other turned and ran. For an instant he thought it was a dwarf, but the motion was too agile. A child then. He

couldn't tell if it was a boy or a girl.

He pursued until his breath came in painful gasps and it seemed his chest would burst. Again and again he saw his quarry, near at hand but out of reach, vanishing around a corner at the end of an alley, on the other side of a courtyard, or gazing down on him from a balcony or from a bridge over a canal.

"Do not dare to trifle with me!"

Bare feet padded on cobblestones. Hard boots clattered after.

But in the morning twilight Kuthomes could go no further. He had to sit down on a stone bench and lean back against a wall, gazing out over the central forum of the city. All around him the temples of the major gods faced one another. The rising sun made the rooftops and the many statues gleam. Divinities, kings, and heroes lining those rooftops and perched on pillars and ledges seemed momentarily alive, gazing down benevolently or wrathfully, each according to their nature. Yawning peddlers opened their stalls. A flock of pigeons stirred, murmuring on the steps of the temple of Bel-Hemad, the god of new life, of springtime, and forgiveness. But the house of Surat-Hemad, the lord of Death, was still a mass of shadows and black stone, the eyes of the carven crocodile head over the doorway aglow like faint coals with some mysterious light of their own.

Kuthomes half-dozed, exhausted, enraged that he had been the object of *a joke* on the first night of the Festival of the Dead. He set the death-bell in his lap, and still it rang, a far more serious matter than anybody's joke. He laid the sword of the Knight Inquisitor across his knees, and the ringing stopped. When he put the sword away, it resumed.

He couldn't think clearly just then, weary and angry as he was, but he was certain that he was proof against illusion, and that there was an answer here somewhere, in the haze and dust and fading shadows. If he concentrated hard enough, he would have it, and his revenge, later.

Was he not Lord Kuthomes, feared and respected by all?

Eventually he fell asleep on the bench and dreamed, strangely, that he, the feared and respected Lord Kuthomes, had ventured alone into the city at night, and that the city was empty. All the revelers, soldiers, courtiers, even the Great King himself had fled before him, and Lord Kuthomes's heavy footsteps echoed in the empty palace, even in the vast Presence Hall where he mounted the throne with the double crown of the Delta and Riverland on his head.

He sat still and silent in his dream, the crown on his head, crocodile-headed scepter in his hand, gazing into the empty darkness, until he heard the sound of the tiny death-bell approaching.

Someone shuffled and emerged from behind a column. Kuthomes stiffened and beheld a tall, cloaked figure approach the throne slowly, tottering like a very old man; no, swaying side-to-side like a crocodile reared up, imitating a human walk.

The thing opened clawed hands when it stood at the foot of the throne. The face beneath the hood was indeed that of a crocodile. In the open hands, nothing at all.

Here was one of the *evatim*, the messengers of Surat-Hemad, whose summons may never be resisted or denied. Kuthomes shrank back in his stolen throne, knowing that all his magic and even the silver sword were useless.



But the other tore off a crocodile mask, uncovering a laughing corpse face identical to that which held the death-bell, head back in a paroxysm of hilarity or terror, mouth agape. In the unimaginable depths of its throat, a tiny bell rang insistently.

Then the apparition breathed *laughter*, neither harsh nor exactly gentle, impatient, with a touch of petulance, and at last a voice spoke from those same black depths, soft, definitely feminine, a young woman's voice, maddeningly familiar.

In his dream, it was too much effort to recall. He almost recognized the voice, but not quite.

"Do you not know me?" the other said.

"No," he replied.

"Ah, but you did once, long ago."

"How long ago was that?"

She only laughed for a brief instant. Then the laughter was gone and the bell rang.

Lord Kuthomes shook himself out of his dream and found himself on the bench at the edge of the dusty forum, in the blazing mid-day sun. The bell, in his lap, still rang. No one had dared to disturb him, of course. Those who gaped in wonder suddenly turned their faces away, pretending not to have seen.

He took up the bell again and lurched to his feet, shouting for an old woman to fetch him a litter. When she had done so, she held out her hand for a coin. He patted his pockets, found nothing, then scowled and spat, tumbling into the litter, drawing the curtain behind him. The bearers set off, the litter lurching, swaying. Kuthomes felt sick by the time he reached his house.

Inside the atrium, the palm fronds and the stain on the floor were still there.

Later. There would be time for that later.

On the second night of the Festival of the Dead, they were dancing.

This was a more somber time. The streets and rooftops echoed with stately music. Paper masks from the first night floated in the canals or littered the streets. Now people wore beautifully carved and adorned wooden masks, ageless, ideal visages which did not so much hide the identity of the wearer as abstract it, like a name written in intricate, illuminated letters.

Musicians, clad in dark cerements and masked in imitation of the *evatim*, moved slowly from house to house, to palace and hovel alike, excepting no one, summoning the inhabitants to dance, to mingle in the wide forum before the temples of the gods. On this night the dead would truly return in great numbers, out of the dreams of *Leshe* and the darkness of *Tashe*, climbing up from the Great River and the city's many canals to walk among the living. It was a night of portents and revelations, of sorrows and bittersweet joys, reunions, secret dooms, and frequent miracles.

Lord Kuthomes had rested and bathed. He had pored over such books of sorcery as he owned and could read, unable to find any answer to the riddle before him, but still certain some enemy had laid a trap.

He would be ready. Once more he anointed himself four times and put on his sorcerer's robe. Once more the silver sword pressed against his thigh. This time even he wore a mask, beautifully wrought, set with gems and feathers until the features of Lord Kuthomes had been transformed into some fantastic, predatory bird.

When the revelers reached his door, he gave them such coin as custom required, then stepped out into the throng, moving along the dark and crowded streets, into the forum where moonlight shone on the roofs of the temples and the many bronze and golden statues. The gods seemed to be watching him alone, waiting for something to happen.

Even the Great King, Wenamon the Ninth, was there with all his lords and ladies, all of them masked, to do homage to Death. Kuthomes took his rightful place in the great circle of their dance. Once he held the warm hand of Queen Valshepsut, who nodded to him, and he to her, before he yielded to the King. Around and around dancers turned, as the musicians followed, pipes skirling, drums beating stately, muted time. Acolytes with lanterns or torches pursued their own paths at the periphery, the intricate revolutions imitating the cycles of the universe. In the center, priests of Death stood motionless in their crocodile masks.

Or were those perhaps the true faces of the *evatim*? The fancy came to Kuthomes that many of the faces around him, in the royal circle, in the crowd, were not masks at all.

In the midst of them was one who did not dance, who clearly did not belong: some scruffy urchin in a paper mask that was probably supposed to be a fox, in shapeless white trousers and shirt, bare feet spread apart, arms this time folded imperiously. He could see the figure clearly.

He broke through the dancers. "You there! Stop!"

But the boy was gone.

Then someone, whose touch was very cold and dry, whose grip was like a vise, took him by the hand and whirled him back into the dance.

He hissed, "Who *dares*?"

But the other merely bowed, with both arms spread wide, then straightened and stepped back, in a half-formed dance step. He discerned a slender lady in rotting funeral clothes, but that meant nothing on this night. Her mask was plain and featureless white, with mere round holes for eyes and mouth.

Now the rhythm of the dance changed. The music slowed and the circles broke apart. Dancers clung to one another, drifting off in pairs into doorways and alleys, beneath canopies, there to unmask.

The stranger led Kuthomes into the darkness beneath a broken bridge, far from the crowd, into silence. They stood on a ledge above the black water of a canal. The other lifted Kuthomes' mask off and made to throw it away, but he snatched it back and held it tightly against his chest. She twirled her own white mask out over the water, where it splashed, then drifted like a sparkle of reflected moonlight.

"Do you not remember me?" she said, speaking not Deltaan but that language universal among the dead, yet known only to sorcerers among the living and never uttered aloud. Kuthomes could make out enough: "... your promise . . . long ago. Our assignation. Complete what you began."

He cried out. He couldn't break free of her arms. Her breath was foul. Her filthy hand pressed over his mouth.

When she let go, he managed to gasp, "Name yourself..."

"Remember poor Kamachina..."

Then she was gone. He heard a splash. The black water rippled. He stepped out of the shadow of the bridge, into the moonlight and stood still, amazed and afraid.

The absurd thing was he didn't know any Kama-china. It was a common female name in the Delta. There must have been hundreds of servants, daughters of minor nobility, whores, whoever. He searched his memory for a specific Kamachina. No, no one. He tried to laugh, to tell himself this was another, tastelessly misconceived joke, that even the dead could blunder.

But then he got the death-bell out of his pocket and held it on his palm. The bell still rang.

On the third and final night of the Festival of the Dead, those who had received special signs assembled in silence on the steps of the black temple of Surat-Hemad, who created the crocodile in his own image.

The temple doors formed the Devouring God's jaws. Bronze teeth gleamed by torchlight. Within the great hall, two red lanterns burning above the altar were the all-seeing eyes of Death. In the vaults beneath the altar, in the belly of Surat-Hemad, dead and living commingled freely, and the waters of dream, of *Leshe*, lapped against the shores of the living world those of the land of the dead. On this night, of all nights, the borders were freely crossed.

The doors swung wide. Twenty or so pilgrims entered.

Dark-clad, bearing the death-bell and his sword, but unmasked, Lord Kuthomes filed in with the others, circling thrice around the altar and the image of the squat-bellied, crocodile-headed Surat-Hemad, then descended into the deeper darkness of the vaults. He walked among stone sarcophagi containing the mummies of great or wicked men, who might return at any time they chose to inhabit such earthly forms.

He placed his hand on the carven effigy of some lord of centuries past. The mummy within stirred and scratched.

His mind was clear, though he had not rested after the second night. He had searched his books and gazed into his mirror for long hours, coming up with no revelation at all. He knew, then, that he could only confront the dead and allow them to speak. His fate, perhaps, was no longer in his own hands.

All things return to Surat-Hemad, so the prayer went.

Yes.

Still he could not remember a specific Kamachina. He didn't know who the boy was either. The child's significance, in particular, eluded him. He did not fit.

All things —

He had even consulted a true sorcerer, an ancient creature deformed and transformed by the magic within him, who walked in swaying jerks like a scarecrow come alive in the wind, whose head flicked constantly from side to side like a bird's, whose noseless face was a mass of scars, whose metal eyes clicked, whose hands were living fire. The sorcerer laughed slyly in a multitude of voices, and turned away.

A priest of Bel-Hemad had merely shaken his head sadly and said, "By the end of the third night, you shall know who this lady is. I am certain of that."

Kuthomes had offered a fantastic sum of money, enough to startle even the priest.

"What is this for?"

"Help me escape. There must be a way."

The priest had merely shrugged, and Kuthomes stalked away from the priest's house, muttering to himself, striking people and objects in blind rage, pacing back and forth to fill the hours until the sun set and the third night of the Festival of the Dead began. The waiting was the worst part.

Dread Surat-Hemad, may all things be completed and finished and laid to rest, the prayers went.

Lord Kuthomes did not often pray.

Now he walked among the tombs of the ancient, sorcerous dead, the carven, laughing corpse-face in his hand, the tiny bell in its throat tinkling. Like all the others, he followed the sputtering tapers held aloft by the masked priests of Death, until all had gathered in an open space before a vast doorway.

A priest touched a lever. Counterweights shifted somewhere. Stone ground against stone, and the doors slid aside. Cold, damp air blew into the musty crypt, smelling of river mud and corruption.

Here was the actual threshold of the world of the dead. Beyond this door, he knew, down a little slope, black water lapped silently. Funeral barges waited to carry the dead — and the living — into *Leshe*, where madmen, visionaries, and sorcerers might glimpse Lord Kuthomes passing through their dreams.



Kuthomes hoped they would know and remember whom they had seen.

At the threshold, the tiny death-bell stopped ringing. Kuthomes threw it away, certain it was of no further use.

He reached under his robe and drew out the silver sword.

"You won't need that." A warm, living hand caught his wrist. The voice was soft, but not feminine, speaking Deltan, accented very slightly. The boy.

Kuthomes slid the sword back into the scabbard. "Who are you?"

"One who will guide you to your trysting place. Lord Kuthomes, the Lady Kamachina awaits."

"Explain yourself, or die."

"If you kill me, you will never know the answer, will you?"

"There are slow methods . . . which inspire eloquence . . ."

"But hardly worth the exertion, Lord. Come with me, and all will be made clear."

Kuthomes hesitated. Slowly, the other pilgrims crossed the threshold. What could he do but follow? The boy was waiting.

Hand-in-hand, the two of them passed through the door and into absolute darkness, where not even the priests with their tapers dared accompany them. The only sound was the sucking of boots in the mud. The boy seemed to know where he was going. Kuthomes allowed himself to be led. They groped their way into a barge and sat still, among many other wordless pilgrims.

Then they were adrift, and gradually stars appeared overhead, not those seen over the Delta on any summer night, but the stars of Deathlands, *of Tashe*.

He discerned crocodile-headed things in the river, thousands, floating along like a great mass of weed; but their bodies were pale and human, like naked, drowned men. These were the true messengers of Death, the *evatim*.

Someone in the company shrieked, stood up, and did a frantic, whirling dance, hands waving and slapping as if in an attempt to fend off invisible hornets. He fell into the river with a splash. The *evatim* hissed all as one, the sound like a rising wind.

Someone else began strumming a harp. A song arose from many voices, a gentle, desolate lyric in the language of the dead. From out of the air, from far beyond the barge, more voices joined in.

Many wept. Kuthomes was unmoved, impatient, tensely alert.

The boy took his hand again, as if seeking or offering comfort. He couldn't tell which.

They were deep into Dream now, and the visions began. Some of the others cried out from sudden things Kuthomes could not see; but he was able to behold vast shapes in the sky, half human, half-beast, like clouds moving *behind* the stars, pausing in some incomprehensible journey to glance down at those in the barge below. These might have been the gods, or the Shadow Titans, from whom all sorcery flowed. Kuthomes had no idea. He did not choose to ask the masked boy beside him, who, he was certain, *did* know.

From *Leshe*, Dream, as they passed over into the realm of Death, the rest of the adventure was like a dream, inexplicable, without continuity.

Once it seemed that he and the boy sat alone on the barge. The boy closed and opened his hands, and blue flames rose from his scarred palms. Kuthomes removed the boy's shabby mask, tossing it out among the *evatim*. By the blue light, he could see a very ordinary face, soft, beardless, with large, dark eyes; a man-child somewhere in the middle teens, with tangled, dark hair. Part of one of the boy's ears was missing. That struck Kuthomes as merely odd.

"Who are you?" he whispered in the language of the dead.

In that same tongue the boy replied, "A messenger."

"One of the *evatim* then?"

"What do you think?"

"You seem alive."

"Death, also, is a kind of life."

In another part of the dream they walked on water, barefoot because the river would not hold up Kuth-

omes as long as he wore boots. Ripples spread on the frigid surface. They walked through a dead marsh in wintertime. Among the reeds, skeletal, translucent birds waded on impossibly delicate legs.

Later still, the sky brightened into a dull, metallic gray, without a sunrise, but with enough suffused light that Kuthomes could see clearly. He and the boy walked for hours through sumptuous dust, until they both were covered with it. A wind rose. Swirling dust filled the air. By tricks of half-light and shadow, in the shifting dust, he seemed to make out buried rooftops, part of a city wall, a tower. But all these crumbled away when he touched them, then reformed again somewhere nearby.

Sometimes he saw faces on the ground before him, or in walls or doorways. He made his way through the narrow streets of a city of dust. The boy led him by the hand.

Here was the silently screaming dust-face of Lord Vormisehket, stung by a thousand scorpions; and here Adriuten Shomash with his throat still cut, sand pouring out of the nether mouth beneath his chin. Lady Nefirame and her three children confronted him. She had hurled herself into a well with the children in her arms. So many more, faces and bodies sculpted out of transitory dust, forming and reforming as Kuthomes passed, dust-arms and hands reaching out for him, crumbling, reaching again.

He saw many who had been useful to him for a time, then inconvenient: Akhada the witch; Dakhumet the poisoner, who hurled tiny, darts fashioned like birds; even the former king himself, Baalshekthose, first and only ruler of that name, whose sudden ascent and decent both Kuthomes had brought about.

The boy dragged him on, pulling at his arm, completely plastered with the gray dust so that only his eyes seemed alive.

Kuthomes felt indignant anger more than anything else. Why should these phantoms accuse him? Such deeds were the stuff of politics. Those who wielded power must be, by the nature of that power, above the common morality.

It was only when they came to a halt by a broken bridge over a dust-choked canal that Kuthomes recognized where he was. Here, in dreams and dust and ash, was a replica, shifting and inexact but a replica nevertheless, of the City of the Delta, of a disreputable district where, many years before, he had promised to meet someone by that bridge.

In this place of dreams and death, amid the dust, the memory came back to him, clearly, like a book opening, its pages turning.

She was waiting for him, tall and slender in her dusty shroud. He knew her even before she spoke, before the caked dirt on her face cracked and fell away like a poorly-wrought mask to reveal empty eyesockets and bare bones.

Her voice was gentle and sad and exactly as he remembered it. She spoke in the language of the dead.

"Kuthomes, my only love, I am your beloved, Kamachina, whom you once promised to marry and make great."

He could not resist her embrace, or her kiss, though both revolted him.

"I never knew what happened to you," he managed to say at last.

He had been seventeen, an upstart from outside the city, youngest of many sons, driven out of his village with few prospects, ridiculed by the great ones of the Delta, desperate for recognition, for a position of any sort. He had dallied with a girl, the daughter of a minor official. Already he was precocious in the ways of the court, though he had yet to set foot inside a palace. His lies had the desired effect, with hints of plots and of suppressed factions soon to rise again; with the implication that Kuthomes was not who he seemed at all, but perhaps a prince in disguise, whose true name would make the mighty tremble. With this and more he secured introductions, a position. In exchange for the favor of the girl Kamachina, he promised to make her family great.

Later, when she pressed her claim and became inconvenient, he put her off, all the while whispering that she and her father were both mad, obsessed with absurd plots. At the very end, there had been the assignation at the bridge. The two of them would exchange marriage vows but keep them secret until the time was right for the revelation.

"But you never came," she said. On that final, sacred night of the Festival of the Dead, when uttered vows are binding forever, he had betrayed her, and, in her grief, she had flung herself into the canal and drowned.

"I truly loved you," she said. "You were my every, my only hope."

"I... did not know."

"I was great with your child. Did you know that?"

"I... had not seen you in several months."

"I could hardly confess such a thing in a letter."

"Someone might have intercepted it," he said.

She dragged him to his knees, then lay by his side in the cold dust.

At last he broke free, stood up, and brushed himself off.

"But all this was almost *forty years ago*. How can it matter now?"

She reached up and took him by the hand. "Among the dead, time moves much more slowly."

He looked around for the boy and saw him crouching nearby in the dust, hands folded over his knees, watching dispassionately.

"Is that your son?"

"I have no son," said Kamachina, reaching up for Kuthomes. "My child is still within me, waiting to be born." Once more she dragged him down into her irresistible embrace, pressing her corpse-mouth against his.

Kuthomes screamed. He fought her, drawing his silver sword, striking her again and again, slashing her head off, hacking her body to pieces.

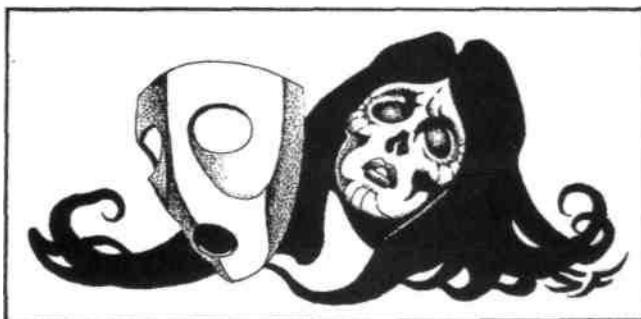
But it was no use. She merely reconstituted herself, a thing of dust and dead bones, sculpted by some magical wind.

She caught his wrist in her crushing grip and made him throw the sword away.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I did what I had to do. I didn't know ... If I could help you, I would, but it's too late..."

"What is begun on the last night of the Festival of the Dead," she said, embracing him once more, "is sacred, inviolate, and must always be consummated."

So it was that Lord Kuthomes came to dwell in the country of the dead with his Lady Kamachina. He was mad with the terror of it all for a long time. It seemed that he sat on a throne, and ruled as emperor among the corpses, but slowly, subtly, they turned from him, perverting his every command, until at last he was cast down, reviled, trampled into filth. He shouted that he was a great lord, that he was *alive* and they mere corpses, but they only laughed at him.



Dead hands tore his entrails out of his body, lifted his bleeding heart up before his face; dead lips drank his blood and devoured him. So it seemed, in his madness, though each time he awoke, he found himself whole.

He tried to bear all this in the manner of a great lord, silently plotting his revenge, but that was absurd, and before long he too was shrieking aloud at the hilarity of the idea.

"How shall I be revenged against myself?" he asked the ghosts. "How?"

They could not answer him.

All the while Kamachina was with him, touching him gently, whispering of her love. She alone did not mock him, nor injure him in any way, but her love was the worst torment of all.

In his madness his mind opened up. The speech of gods and of the Titans poured into him. There were many revelations, passed through Kuthomes into the dreams of men who awoke in the living world.

Gradually his pain and his madness lessened, and it seemed he had merely backtracked along a path he had once taken, then set out on another. His old life became the dream, the fading memory. Now he came to see himself dwelling, not in dust, but in an austere palace of massive pillars and black stone, there waited upon by ghosts, while his wife's belly swelled with his child.

"Is it not the duty of a lord," she said, "to provide for the comfort of those beneath him?"

He supposed it was. He didn't know anymore.

He sat with her in her garden of leafless trees and brittle stalks, listening as she spoke or sang softly in the language of the dead. He learned to play a strange harp made of bones as delicate as strands of silk. He came to behold the growing life in that dead garden, the nearly invisible leaves and blossoms like sculpted smoke, and he ate of the fruits of the trees, which tasted like empty air, and was sustained by them. After a while, he could recall no other taste.

She was delivered there, in the garden. The mysterious boy appeared once more, to assist the birthing.

"Who are you?" Kuthomes asked. "Can you not tell me at last?"

"I am the sorcerer Sekenre," the boy said.

"But, but, one so young —"

"For sorcerers too, as for the dead, time moves differently. I was fifteen when my father caused me to slay him, filling me with his spirit, and the spirits of all his victims, and the victims of his victims, all united in one, who must sometimes struggle to remember that he was once a boy called Sekenre. My voices are like a flock of birds. We are many. But for three hundred years and more, my body has not aged. I have learned and forgotten many things, as you, Kuthomes, have learned and forgotten."

"I too have a hard time remembering who I am sometimes," said Kuthomes. "We are alike."

"You are the loving father of this child." The boy Sekenre reached into Lady Kamachina's dead womb and lifted an infant girl out in his hands. Kuthomes thought his daughter looked more like a delicate carving than a child: skin translucently white, eyes open and unblinking, the expression severe.

Sekenre passed the baby to Kuthomes, who rested it in his lap.

"The world shall fear this one," Sekenre said, "but not for any evil in her. She is a mirror of the evil in others. In a hundred years' time I shall need her as my ally, against an enemy yet unborn."

"Therefore you have directed all these things, my entire life, to your own purposes."

"Yes, I have," said Sekenre.

Kuthomes shrugged. "I suppose one has to do such things." He felt, vaguely, that he should be angry, but there was no passion left in him.



Kamachina smiled and took the child from him. Ghosts gathered around them, whispering like a faint wind.

On the last night of the Festival of the Dead, Lord Kuthomes emerged from the vaults beneath the temple of Surat-Hemad in the City of the Delta. He had grown very old. His once tall, vigorous figure was bent, his silver beard now purest white. No one knew him, or the bone-pale girl he led into the world.

His daughter clung to his arm, her eyes dazzled even by the gloom of the inside of the temple; amazed at everything she saw, whispering to him, for comfort, then out of excitement, chattering softly in the language of the dead. The grave-wrappings she wore had partially fallen away, revealing almost transparent skin. She seemed more to float on the air than to walk.

Outside, she had to cover her face from the starlight. Kuthomes found a discarded mask for her.

They walked through streets he remembered now only from his dreams. She had so many questions he could not answer. He took her tiny hand in his and led her to a place he had dreamed, where a certain

magician was waiting. This man would nurture her for five years before an enemy killed him, bore her off, and came to regret the prize.

But these things were Sekenre's business.

Kuthomes departed without even bidding his daughter farewell, then hurried back to the temple of Surat-Hemad, and descended into the vaults, so that what had been begun on the last night of the Festival of the Dead could at last be finished. **Q**



BEDDY-BYE

F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre

illustrated by Allen Koszowski

Audrey had ripped off Betty's head again, and was knocking it around the room like a football. I was trying to carry on a civilized conversation with Sylvia, but Audrey drop-kicked Betty's head across the room; it landed in my lap, and Betty's blue eyes stared up at me while her mouth smiled patiently.

Sylvia frowned at Audrey. "I paid a lot of money for that doll, Audrey. You ought to take better care of it."

"It's a *cheap* doll! It's a **CHEAP** doll!" Audrey screeched. "I wanted one of those expensive dolls, the kind that talks when you pull the ring in her back. Betty is a **CHEAP** doll!"

"Well, you'd better put her back together, or you'll have no doll at all," said Sylvia impatiently.

"Oh, all right, Mom," Snuffling pathetically, Audrey harvested the various arms and legs of Betty from the places where she'd flung them, and started putting the doll back together. That's the problem I have when I date divorcees; they tend to have kids, and the wee kiddiewinks tend to be hideous brats. Audrey finished reassembling the doll — Betty's head was on backwards, reminding me of something I'd seen in a horror movie once — and held it up for her mother's inspection.

Sylvia nodded approvingly. "Very good, Audrey." She glanced at the clock, and then uttered the fateful words: "Time for bed."

"But, Mommmmm..."

"Time for *bed*, Audrey. Go in and change, and I'll be there to tuck you in."

"Will you read me a story?"

Sylvia sighed audibly. "Aren't you getting to be a big girl now, Audrey? Big enough to go to bed without.."

"I want a story! I want a story!"

"*I'll* read her a story," I offered, picking up Audrey's storybook and glancing at the contents. The stories seemed innocuous enough: the three little pigs, the three little bears, the three little billy goats ...

Sylvia eyed me gratefully, and then nodded to Audrey. "Go in and get ready for bed, dear, and then Uncle Fergus will read you a story and tuck you into bed. Take your doll with you."

I know what I'd *like* to tuck her into," I muttered, from behind the storybook. Audrey galloped off to the nursery, whomping Betty's head against the wall as she departed. For five minutes or so, Sylvia and I were actually able to carry on an adult conversation, over drinks, and then Audrey's hideous prepubescent lungs erupted from the nursery, "**I'M READY FOR BEDDY!**"

I got up, sighed heavily, and reached for the story-book. "Keep the gin cold," I said, kissing Sylvia and shambling off to meet my doom in the nursery. "This won't take long...."

Audrey had flung her clothes all over the room and was now under the bed covers, presumably wearing her jammies. Her obnoxious face — a double-row of snaggle-teeth, surrounded on all sides by freckles — was grinning at me from the pillow. "Where's Betty?" I asked.

"Over there." Audrey pointed triumphantly. "Betty was bad, so I had to *punish* her."

I looked where Audrey was pointing. Betty the doll had been bound and gagged with handkerchiefs, spread-eagled across the saddle of a rocking-horse. I freed the doll, and looked at it; Betty's blue-glass eyes looked back at me impassively. I left the doll on the floor near Audrey's bed, then I pulled up a chair and started thumbing through the storybook. "Right. What story would you like tonight, then? The three little kittens? The three little ducklings?"

"*I hate* those stories! I HATE those stories!" Audrey's little fingers snatched the storybook out of my hands, and sent it whizzing across the room. The book struck the rocking-horse's face, and sent the wooden horse rocking back and forth crazily. "I want a *scary* story!" Audrey demanded.

A *scary* story? Well, now: *this* was a field in which I had some expertise; Audrey didn't seem to realize what she was letting herself in for.

"All right," I began, "Once upon a time there was a little girl, and her name was ..."

"Audrey!" screeched Audrey. She was clearly determined to play an active role in the proceedings.

"That's right," I nodded. "There was a little girl named Audrey. One night she went to bed and went right to sleep, and ..."

"*I hate* this story! I HATE this story!" Audrey screeched.

"I hadn't finished. Audrey went to sleep, and she started dreaming. In her dream, Audrey was *flying*. She was able to fly right up to the ceiling of her bedroom. She went up to the ceiling, and then went right *through* it, like a ghost."

"That's impossible," Audrey protested.

"No, it isn't," I said. "Audrey was asleep, remember? Her body stayed in the bed, and her dream-body — the part that was having the dream — was able to go through the ceiling. Like a ghost."

"Oh, that's different." Audrey seemed satisfied, now that I was keeping the story firmly grounded on a scientific basis. "And *then* what happened?"

"Audrey's dream-self went right up through the roof, and flew around in the sky. She was able to fly

anywhere she wanted, and go right through walls, and look into people's houses. But none of the people could see her or hear her, because Audrey's dream-self was invisible, like a ghost. She could look into their living rooms, and look into their dining rooms, and look into ..."

"... their *bathrooms*!" Audrey giggled, and clapped her hands with delight. "I *like* this story! Then what happened?"

"Well, Audrey kept flying around in the sky, and she saw other people flying around too. They were people whose bodies were asleep, like Audrey's body was, and their dream-bodies were floating around like Audrey was."

"I'll bet none of the people were Chinese," Audrey decided. "Because it's daytime in China when it's bedtime over *here*."

"There were all kinds of people," I told her. "Men and women and children, and even dogs and cats. Animals have dreams too, so the dream-dogs and dream-cats had come out of their bodies, and were flying around with all the other dreamers."

Audrey pondered the consequences of this. "Were there any dream-birds?" she asked.

"No. Birds can fly anytime they want, so they never dream about flying. The birds were dreaming too, but in their dreams they were *swimming*. Dream-birds don't get to swim very often."

"Were there dream-fish?" Audrey wanted to know.

"Yes, and there was a dream-lion, because the lion over at the zoo was asleep that night too. All the animals were dreaming."

"Were there dream-roaches?" Audrey persisted.

"No. There weren't any dream-roaches, because roaches never sleep. Anyway, Audrey's dream-body was floating around in the clouds, and all of a sudden she met somebody she knew. Can you guess who it was?"

Audrey frowned. "This isn't going to be one of my friends from school, is it? I *hate* all my friends from school. Especially Ethel. She's so fat, when she bends over she wheezes, and ..."

"No, it wasn't Ethel. And besides, Ethel's dream-self is thin; you probably wouldn't recognize her. Anyway, the dream-Audrey was flying around in the clouds, and who do you think she met?"

Audrey considered several possibilities, and then wrinkled her nose, "I give up. Who?"

"It was *Betty*!"

"Betty my *doll*?" Audrey glared distastefully at Betty; the doll was sitting quietly in her pinafore, staring at Audrey, and hadn't moved. "But that's *impossible*!"

"No, it isn't." I stealthily reached up and turned out the light, and now Audrey and Betty and I were alone in the dark. "Dolls sleep too, and dolls have dreams. So Betty's doll-body stayed here, and her dream-body was flying around in the clouds overhead. 'How did you get up here, Betty?' Audrey asked her doll.

"The doll looked at Audrey while they both flew through a cloud. 'You let me out, Audrey; remember?' the doll answered. 'You pulled my head off, and kicked it across the room. So I was able to get out of my doll-body through the neck-hole, and here I am!'

"Audrey thought about this while they flew through the cloud. 'I have to be getting home,' she said to her doll.

"'So do I,' said Betty. 'Come on! I'll *race* you!'

"Well, Audrey turned around in a cloudbank, and flew back to her house as fast as she could go. But Betty the doll was right next to her, flying just as fast as *she* could go. They got back home, and Audrey flew through the roof of her bedroom, and then *what* do you suppose she saw?"

There was a silence in the dark, and Audrey fought back a yawn. Her seven-year-old body seemed to be getting tired at last after a long hard day of doll-bashing, but her seven-year-old mind seemed determined to stay awake "Wh-what did Audrey see?" she managed to ask.

"She saw her own body asleep in the bed, of course. And she also saw Betty's doll-body lying on the floor, with Betty's head lying nearby. Well, Audrey flew back to her own body, and was just about to climb into it, when suddenly...

"'Beat you!' Suddenly Betty elbowed Audrey aside, and then *Betty* jumped into Audrey's sleeping body. Audrey tried to get in too, but there wasn't room in there for *two* people. Audrey was trapped outside her own body, like a ghost, and all she could do was bang against it with her little ghost-fists, yelling 'Let me in! Let me in!' And then, all of a sudden . . . Audrey's sleeping body opened its eyes, and *woke up!*'"



There was a faint gasp in the dark, from the direction of Audrey's pillow. The only nice thing about hyperactive brats like Audrey is that sooner or later the hyperactive cycle hits its down-phase, and then they *have* to go to sleep. I kept going:

"Audrey's body got out of bed and started walking across the room. Only it wasn't Audrey in there now; it was Betty! Audrey was starting to get frightened, because she didn't want to be a ghost forever. She needed a body! She looked around the bedroom, but the only body she could find was Betty's doll-body, with no head. Audrey's dream-self flew into it.

"Instantly, Audrey's body ran over, and snatched up the doll-head, and *snapped* it onto the doll-body! And now Audrey was trapped inside the body of Betty the doll, like a fly caught in a jar. So now Betty was Audrey, and Audrey was Betty."

I let that hang in the air for a moment. The real Audrey, tucked into bed, shifted nervously as if trying to stay awake. Finally she asked weakly, "Wh-what was it like?"

"To be a doll? It was terrible. The doll-body had arms and legs, but Audrey couldn't move them; dolls can't move by themselves. She could look out at the world through the doll's glass eyes, and hear with the doll's plastic ears, but she couldn't *speak*. Everybody knows that dolls can't talk, except for the expensive ones with the ring in their backs. This was a cheap doll."

"And ... and *then* what happened?"

"Nothing much. Betty the doll, wearing Audrey's body, put on Audrey's clothes and pretended to be Audrey. She took her doll — who was really Audrey — and threw her in the bottom of the closet. Once in a while Audrey's mother would find the doll, and then Audrey would try to talk to her: 'It's me! It's me! Let me out! I'm Audrey!' But Audrey's mother couldn't hear her."

I let that concept hang in the dark for a while, and then Audrey asked: "Did . . . did Audrey *die*?"

"No, of course not. She couldn't eat or drink or go to the bathroom, but now that she was a plastic doll she didn't *have* to. Meanwhile, Betty was a real little girl now, wearing Audrey's body. All the schools burned down, so Betty didn't have to go to school. She had lots of fun being Audrey, wearing Audrey's clothes and doing all the things that Audrey would have liked to do instead of being a doll in the bottom of the closet.

"Years later Audrey's body grew up — with Betty inside it, of course — and became a teenager, and that was the year that Audrey's mother got killed in a horrible accident on the M4 motorway. Betty went to the funeral, pretending to be Audrey, and everybody thought she was crying but she was really laughing. She took all the money that Audrey's mother had left behind, and she went on a cruise around the world. And do you know what she took with her?"

There was silence in the dark, and then a sniff. "What?"

"She took a doll, of course. One special doll, from the bottom of her closet. Late one night in the middle

of the Pacific Ocean, slightly to the left of Australia, Betty took the plastic doll with Audrey trapped inside it, and threw it into the ocean.

"But Audrey didn't drown, of course; doll-bodies don't breathe. She floated on top of the ocean for a long time, and then she sank to the bottom. And she stayed there at the bottom of the ocean forever. She couldn't *die*, not ever, because the doll-body was made of high-impact plastic."

There was another long silence in the dark. Audrey yawned again; her mind was trying to force her body to stay awake. "Is that... is that the end of the story?" she asked.

"Yes, it is," I assured her. "Of course, none of it would ever have happened if Audrey had managed to stay *awake* all night. It was only because Audrey went to *sleep* that Betty the doll was able to switch bodies with her."

Now I got up, and kissed Audrey in the dark.
"Nighty-night. Try to get some sleep." I picked some
thing up off the floor, and thrust it under the covers
next to her. "Here's your *doll*."Q

LIMERICK KNIGHTLY

Said the knight, "I once heeded your pleas,
"And I slew that old dragon with ease.
 "But now something seems queer.
 "Please explain to me, dear,
"Why our twins singe their clothes when they sneeze."

— John Clayton

OTHERWHYS

Why does Sun?

Why, Moon?

Ah, those are two different whys.

One why is of gaseous fire

— Trembling meniscus

On gravity's deep pool.

The other why, of that harem-captive

Marble odalisque

— Body of passive stone

So cold while Sun's gaze

Is turned away, yet

Agonizedly incandescent

If caressed.

Worlds are only moons of a Sun;

Yet the lover, the empress,

Visits her World daily,

Not fortnightly

In rotation.

Sun's touch warms World,

Does not scald.

Hence that jealousy

Of Moon towards World,

Envy that steals the breath

Away, crusting acne

On Moon's skin.

Moon would throw stones at World,

Flail World with the hair

Of comets ...

Why else does Moon conspire

To seed nightmares?

For Moon is vexed

If Sun is peering elsewhere

— Staring avidly out

At those others

Whom Sun truly adores:

Sun's flame-sisters

Stars lost so far away

Except to a gaze

Always centuries

Out of date.

Why, is the sigh

Of the sea-tide seduced

By bitter Moon...

One day Moon will plunge

Into warm World,

Shattering herself

In a rupturous and

Forced embrace.

What shall issue

From this genocidal union?

Eventually, some aeons afterwards?

Perhaps a new race

Of tortoise-roaches,

Of armoured ants

— Or of sapient spiders

That dream

And ask why.

Yet one why will be missing

From their understanding —

Being sunk in the bowl Of a

new ocean Around which the

breasts Of lunar mountains

rear.

— Ian Watson

... TO FAST IN FIRES ...
by Charles D. Eckert

illustrated by George Barr

Mallory was feeling old.

The close-cropped, graying veteran had been a civilian now, as well as Shift Leader, for many years. Yet everyone on the security detachment, including rookies lacing the periphery of the Team, still called him "Colonel." He had grown used to the familiar honorific, over time.

But time has a way of changing things.

"All clear, sir," Mallory said, looking at his boss with the seasoned objectivity of an experienced professional, thinking: *They keep getting younger. His predecessors seemed more my age. Now, even code names get recycled. I not only feel like their father, I'm beginning to look the part.* "Area secured."

"I'll go on by myself," Wanderer said.

"Unwise, Mr. President."

"Noted. Confine your people to the perimeter, as always."

"Consider it done."

Landscape gripped cold contours of fog,

Practically speaking, the best time to "close" any place open 24 hours is to do so in the so-called wee hours of the morning — 2:00 A.M. to 4:00 A.M. — or thereabouts. Few, if any, odd insomniac stragglers might find themselves "temporarily inconvenienced." A private visit could then be simply and properly managed. Colonel Mallory and the Team were pros at the process. Even the lights would, in fact *should*, be left on. Better visibility was a serendipitous result. Though, in this case, illumination shone only about half-way up the surface(s), and that but dimly, as seen from any distance in these obscured conditions.

Wanderer passed the slightly-larger-than-life-sized sculpture, cast to depict one understated yet remarkably poignant moment — bronze eyes, not merely *perceiving* but doing so with uncommon clarity, born of shared pain and experience — and made his slow way down the clean, narrow walkway, bound on the lawn side by a small chain barrier and on the other by spaced, wedge-shaped ground lamps shining up the polished black panels of engraved, gleaming granite, all etched with names.

So many names.

". . . inscribed in the order they were taken from us..."

A once controversial design gave distinct edificial impressions, rising out of slashed ground: smoothing gracefully, ascending to a vertex of two "wings" meeting at specific degrees of angle — according to his briefing — the center of an extended black chevron; descending thereafter, as the rougher stone path rose again to ground level, a total of almost 500 feet of long, reflective, darkened mirror.

Strange to recall there were no graves here.

Wanderer could hardly expect many to fully appreciate why he needed to repeatedly visit this place. It would never — *could* never — be easy to explain complex reasons to those who had not been of a certain age during troubled times, had not experienced an era from specific perspectives, had not burned with particular passions, had not endured what seemed unique pain.

A nation's wounds reflect those of its people.

Thus, Wanderer felt obligated to be here, at this — yes, holy — place, *sans* any distractions at all. Where, undisturbed *among* burnished Indian stones, his *own* healing might resume. What better way to start?

Yet something had happened during his first 'solitary' nocturnal visit. Shaken his very core. It recurred the second time, as well. Wanderer didn't think he was going crazy. In fact, he never seriously considered that possibility. No "agonizing self-appraisal" there. But with all the pressures of his job, *could* he ever be sure?

How? *Sometimes you just have to believe what you see.*

Intense fog swirled and divided. *There he is!*

Since the first time Wanderer had seen the soldier step out of the mist — not only had he been surprised, since he'd given explicit orders to be left alone, but also he had also been quite taken aback by the unfamiliar weapon (any weapon!) the soldier carried: where was security? — an indescribable calm surrounded Wanderer immediately. Then and Now. He somehow *knew* he was not in any danger. At least, not as he understood that term.

Spreading warmth proved oddly comforting: a presence, intimate, enfolding.

The soldier leaned his "Bloop Gun" — M79 40-mm Grenade Launcher — against the cool surface of the panel he always chose. He removed his helmet, with its bottle of "bug juice" in the band, put it down carefully in the damp alongside the big wooden butt-stock of the weapon so his hands could be free as he stood.

With an exquisite, touching reverence, the soldier —an ever-so-painfully young *boy*, he always seemed to be at this point — reached out and up, fingertips quivering across a name traced in stone. Same one, no doubt, as before.

The soldier froze there, rooted deeper than the roughened-rock pathway beneath wet/dried mud on worn, booted feet. Solid and singular, as the panel reflecting his jungle fatigues. Yet, for reasons unknown, Wanderer couldn't shake the visceral sensation that *others*—though no one to be seen—gathered around this lone, sweat-stained figure, sharing the otherwise unshareable.

Time ceased to matter.

Several distant pistol shots echoed faintly over the grounds — faintly to Wanderer's civilian senses; city sounds travel far in night's relative quiet — but sharp and clear to the soldier, who spun and crouched in a startling, cat-smooth movement, reaching for the reassurance of his weapon.

The faint shots could have any number of origins, Wanderer thought: *a domestic disturbance; some cold, random drive-by with no articulable reason; a drug deal gone sour, or rival gangs disputing turf and market share. Could be anything.* But what was it to this 'visitor'?

The soldier swept the area with what a previous generation called the thousand-yard stare. Taking care of business. A knowing smirk altered the now perceptibly aged(?) face.

"Get some —" the soldier whispered.

"Heard you comin', long way off."

"Sorry," said Wanderer.

"Typical F. N. G." The soldier shrugged. "You'll learn."

"F.N.G.?"

"Fuckin' New Guy."

Been called worse.

"Everybody starts somewhere," Wanderer said.

"Got *that* right." The soldier shifted to a relaxed squat. "Make yourself at home."

"Wish I could." Wanderer tried to match positions without straining too much. "Sometimes, it's almost as if—"

"— You get the feelin' you're not welcome?"

"Something like that."

The soldier nodded. "Tough to forget the stares; weird accusations; the whispers. Like just touchin' folks, even breathin' the same air, might pass on a dose of 'Saigon Rose,' and they figure penicillin's no good. Not welcome. Yeah."

No graves, true; but much lies buried.

Wanderer's Kevlar overcoat weighed heavy in the chill.

"Keepin' busy?" the soldier said.

"They let me out occasionally," said Wanderer.

"Same here."

Wanderer had had lots of practice holding a smile.

"I've been meaning to ask —" said Wanderer.

The soldier's eyes retreated into his now cammo-smeared(?) face.

"— Who —?" Wanderer gestured to dark marble behind them.

"Nobody."

"I don't believe that," Wanderer said. "You wouldn't keep coming back for 'nobody'."

"Maybe not," the soldier said. "How about you?"

* * *

"Take it easy, man," a young Wanderer said to his friend, loud enough to be heard over blitting backfire. "County mounties have been know to rise out of the ooze."

The '52 Hudson's in-line eight engine roared with plass-pack authority — turning heads on all four corners of the street — slowing to a low, loping rumble, as it wound its throaty way down.

"Tough shitsky," Andy said with equal volume, caressing the chrome shaft of *The Green Hornet's* floor shifter. "They can kiss my —"

Wide slicks screamed and spun out blue smoke, leaving long dual streaks on the pavement. Wanderer felt the gees pressing him back into the vintage comfort of the front passenger seat. Andy drove straight and rock-steady, with satin progression through the gears. A few fat June bugs splattered against thick windshield as the car consumed blacktop. City limits signs flew by — much too soon! — fading at frightening velocity from receding reflections in a cracked rear-view mirror.

Damn, that monster could move.

A famous local drive-in fast approached at the end of the curved short chute down State Road 11. Burgers & fries had been served at that location long before God, or at least since before anyone could remember, which amounted to the same thing. The decision was automatic.

Andy down-shifted with commendable aplomb.

There they were: two horny high school seniors, full of beer and bitching, cocksure young scoundrels and phony cocksmeen suffering from testosterone overload, ready for bear and looking for love — or a reasonable facsimile.

It seemed as though they had known each other forever. Little League baseball, at first; all the way to summer jobs at the same factory. The odd keg, here and there. Nothing unusual, really, except double-dating a pair of salsa-hot twin sisters, which had its own set of pleasurable parameters. Other than that, their lives contained mostly stereotypical stuff.

But the times, they were a-changin'.

Grooving to the soothing dulcet tones of the Rolling Stones's classic "Honky-Tonk Woman" — which, or course, lyrically described situations with which they would have been only too happy to become accustomed — the topic of their soon-to-be graduation surfaced.

"What have you got on tap, man?" Andy said.

"You know I've always wanted college," Wanderer told him, leering at the nearest car-hop. "So, that's where it's at."

"Far out," Andy nodded. "School never was my favorite place. Gettin' my military obligation out of the way. I'll decide what to do after that."

They didn't speak.

Why do some dreams become nightmares? If we select one crucial option instead of another, does someone else walk that alternate path in our place ?

Time is a ruthless judge.

The Byrds' "Turn, Turn, Turn" wafted from the radio.

"You be careful, man," young Wanderer finally said, quietly.

"Aw, don't worry," Andy chuckled, soft-punching his friend's arm. "You know me. Look up *caution* in the dictionary; you'll see my picture. Besides, come right down to it, I've always done enough fightin' for both of us."

* * *

Wanderer shivered, like his thoughts, next to black granite.

"Hard to know the truth of that," Wanderer heard himself saying. "But he sure did the dying." Pause.

"He's here," the soldier said.

Wanderer drew a shallow breath. "Yeah, I know."

Special needs require unique graves.

Reaching back for cold stones —

"Don't touch that!" the soldier said.

Both hands withdrew.

"Sorry," said Wanderer.

"My turn to apologize," the soldier said. "You grow possessive of things, before long. Even of pain. Can you digit?"

"I think so." Silence.

"Ridge was somethin' else," said the soldier.

Wanderer nodded in the foggy dark. "Ridge?"

"Short for Ridge-runner," the soldier went on. "Big ol' country bubba from near Fayetteville —"

"— I grew up close by —"

"— Anyway, it hurts to lose friends. Over and over, it gets worse."

"I can dig *that*," Wanderer said.

"Bitchin'," said the soldier. "After a while, you close up. You figure if they're *not* friends, anymore, their loss hurts less. Besides, why get close to guys who might not be around that long? Most didn't even know enough, at first, to throw out their underwear in-country for causin' crotch rot. How could you expect 'em to understand anything important? But Ridge caught on fast. He was unusual in a lot of respects. Too smart by half, maybe. Ask how he'd come to be where he was, say, and he'd tell you one story, long and rambling. The next day he'd offer somethin' noticeably different about the same subject, or some other, and never bat an eye. Kinda funny, really. Set off bullshit detectors wherever he went. Yet Ridge was very smooth, and quick to see an angle. Managed to charm his way around Mike Papas, once or twice. Popular with the An Tan skivvy girls, too. Doin' his best to 'make the world safe for hypocrisy.' What the Hell? So were most politicians back home. But they were there; we were nowhere near; and it was Ridge's turn to walk point."

"Sounds simple," Wanderer said. "Good or bad?"

"I kindly fuckin' doubt he thought it'd be fun."

* * *

Ridge did fine, walking point, till he hit a tripwire.

"Tai Sao?"

Why?

The emaciated farmer kept bowing, gnarled hands clasped tightly in front of him, not only as though he were locked as well in indeterminate age, but also born, bobbing, in that position.

Who knows? Ridge thought through a haze of pain. *Maybe he was.*

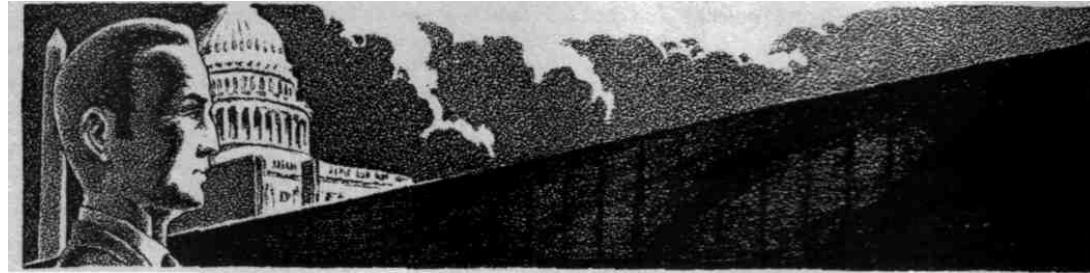
"Tai Sao?"

Like everything else, proverbially, there was —

GOOD NEWS:

When artillery failed to suppress hostile mortar fire at the map coordinates called in, a follow-up air-strike was urgently requested, same same. F-105 Thunderchiefs danced down. The Thuds laid napalm eggs where they'd crisp the right critters, then hauled ass. Three beautiful A-IE

Skyraiders, with their old-time propeller sounds, hung around for shits & grins, basically, before heading back.



"Go Get 'Em — Done Got 'Em."

Local village untouched.

Number One!

And —

BAD NEWS:

Farmer's field(s) completely engulfed by rising, roiling clouds of flame-fed, fetid black smoke. No crops: no harvest. Family goes hungry. Village pinched even poorer than before.

"Shit happens."

Number Ten.

"Tai Sao?"

"I'm not sure 'why' either, Papasan," Ridge struggled to say.

No one could be certain what sort of mine it had been. Howitzer shells were highly prized for that purpose. Whatever it was, it had been big.

For an incredibly slow moment, Ridge had appeared to float both in and over a dense, expanding cloud of rapidly thinning pinkish mist, which dissipated with the shock wave that knocked down anyone close to its path. There must have been one hell of a noise. Curiously hard to tell. Hearing took time to return. Meanwhile, Ridge tumbled like a spent casing. His legs were just gone.

* * *

Fog seemed to shift the soldier's features, as Wanderer listened.

"They rigged a poncho and carried him back to the Landing Zone, for Medevac. His groin was a first-rate mess, too, not just what was left of his legs. Tourniquets kept him from bleedin' to death. But he was goin' into shock. So, they moved as quick as they could. Still don't understand why he didn't scream more than he did."

Something about the definite change in the man's face —

"Lucky we didn't have to deal with a hot LZ. Yet anytime slicks swooped in for dust-off you could usually count on *somebody* takin' a shot at the Hueys."

— What was it?

"Anyway, Ridge mumbled about a lot of things: home, his mother, food, friends, girls — you name it."

And the voice, as well.

"You try to keep each other goin'. So, after the choppers were airborne, somebody held Ridge's head in his hands while the medics did their number on him. 'Hang in, buddy,' somebody said. 'You got the million dollar wound. That means stateside, son. Back to the world. No more of this happy horseshit for you. You're gonna be ballin' round-eye chicks. Real soon. You save some for me, now. Y' heah? You save some for me!'"

Wanderer's gut twisted and sank.

"Aw, he knew they was lyin'," the soldier hissed. "Ridge looked up and said: 'Man, if my willie ain't gonna work, I don't want to live.' " Pause.

"And, by damn, he didn't."

Through his tears, Wanderer saw a heart-stopping countenance.

"Sir?"

I don't like interruptions! Wanderer thought, attention riveting on the annoying source. *This had better be important.*

"Urgent message on back-channels," Colonel Mallory said, "STAT."

"Now?"

"Yes, sir. A communication from *Crown*."

Oh, well. Wanderer hadn't accomplished anything in his career without paying a price. Heavy ones, more often than not. Mary Todd Lincoln was a bitch on wheels, they say.

Past anchors present.

"I know I've asked you before —" Wanderer said.

It was hard to believe Mallory could blush.

— And you'll get the same answer. You come here alone. You walk in solitude. You talk to yourself awhile, then we leave. That's all that ever happens. There's *never* anyone else here."

"But—"

"We're not in the habit of allowing strangers near you, sir. Not if given any choice. We like to think we're pretty good at what we do. No one is showing up to meet you. Not here."



Without graves, can anything truly be laid to rest? "No," Wanderer said, "of course, not." Mallory wondered, once again, whether he should include any of this in his report. "Are you all right, sir?"

Wanderer very much admired this craggy-faced fellow. This frighteningly competent ex-military man, who now searched The Boss's features, knowingly efficiently, yet with strangely sympathetic eyes. What had not *he* experienced in his long life and career? Deep down, *shouldn't* most combat veterans believe they're going to heaven because they've already served time elsewhere?

If so, where did that leave Wanderer?

—*Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night, And for the day confined to fast in fires, Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature Are burnt and purged away —*

Pain kindled and flared, for all to see.

—*But that I am forbid*

*To tell the secrets of my prison-house,
I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul —*

"Sir?"

Wanderer turned to take in his surroundings once more.

Are even graven enough?

Startled by his own reflection in the shining granite, Wanderer became convinced he could hear a whup-whup-whup of helicopters, a high-pitched doppler shrieking of jet engines overhead, astounding rate-of-fire out of "Spooky" (*How do I know about that gunship?*), in pseudo-symphonic conjunction with a crump and crunch of heavy weapons.

Stark silence — and a fragrance of monsoon rains.

"Later . . . Andy," Wanderer whispered — if not yet forgiven, at least doing penance, and *finally* approaching peace.

It didn't matter that only he could see his friend's smile.

"Let's get out of here."

"Yes, Mr. President."

At a snap of Mallory's fingers, the Team closed. *Q*

IN THE NIGHT GARDEN

Strange orchids pale as consecrated bone Flick
serpent stamens over rippled glass Preserving species
centuries unknown Outside this hothouse air
where no winds pass Save whispers. Cursed indeed
the heedless hand Which brought such seedlings from
their lightless land!

Thick coiling vines entwine each trellis slat,
Yet bear no wholesome fruit to any mouth:
Such produce once — grown succulent & fat
— Drew forth assassins from Irem's fell south
To pay in witches' blood & wizards' gold (For
but a taste turned sternest tyrants cold).

No living presence tends these leafy rows
Which murmur endlessly in moonlit chill;
Their decadence of scent delights no nose
Still capable of such, nor ever will... The
last to tarry here & lend their toil Now lend
their flesh instead, in place of soil.

— Ann K. Schwader

RING RING!

By Seth Hill

illustrated by Allen Koszowski

Jeff is the guy your parents warn you about: "Too much trouble for this family." I guess we turned out to be too much trouble for a lot of families.

I don't really like Jeff — who does? — he's overweight and socially inept — but he's usually good for something outrageous. Like the time he got to school early, poured fake blood on the ground under the campanile tower, and sprawled face down in the blood with a suicide note pinned to his jacket. It was great. All the girls were screaming. The janitor covered him with a blanket and said a prayer. The principal had a team of psychological counselors there before Jeff jumped up and said he must have fallen asleep.

This time that we caused all the trouble, it was a long rainy two weeks. Stuck indoors. No driver's license until next year, M & D put the Nintendo in jail because I played it for seventeen hours straight, and I had to baby-sit little sister Suzie. How long can you sit in front of the VCR and watch a bunch of freaks yell, "It's morphin time"? I got desperate and called Jeff.

He brought a little gadget his uncle gave him. It was supposed to unscramble the Playboy channel. Suzie asked who wants to watch a bunch of boys play? We said shut up and crawled behind the TV to hook it up. I was sneezing from all the dust I never vacuumed. We turned on the TV There was a blonde with big knockers in a tight dress. My palms got all sweaty. Then she started testifying for Jesus. It turned out we unscrambled the Family Bible Channel.

I clicked off the TV and said to Jeff, "When all else fails," and tossed him the phone.

First we ran all our standard phone jokes. We had been practicing these for so many years, we could string along anyone anytime.

The Raymond joke. Ring ring. Jeff asked, "Hello, is Raymond in, please?" "There's no Raymond here!" "Oh, sorry!" Then I called the same guy and asked the same thing, and Jeff with a different voice, and Suzie, and so on. Finally when the poor guy was getting really ticked off, Jeff called with his best British/snob accent and asked, "Hello there, this is Raymond! I say, have there been any calls for me?" Click!

The Donkey. "Hello, I really hate to complain, but your donkey is in my garden. Yes, I have the right number. . . yes, your donkey. What, you don't own a donkey? Well, don't worry, because I don't have a garden!" Click!

Bait the Attorney. I called 1-(800)-TOP LEGAL and used my most pitiful whine: "I work in a library. My boss made me climb that old, damaged ladder. The books fell and broke both my legs. Now my boss says I have to come back to work. Yes, I'll wait until you call an attorney to the line. Hello, yes, now that you mention it, I do have headaches and chronic back pain. Yes, I'll wait until you call your general partner to the line. Hello, yes, now that you mention it, when I fell off the ladder it got recorded by a security system videotape. On the tape, you can see my boss walking over and kicking me in my broken legs." I strung them along until their salivating almost shorted out the phone, then Jeff came on and said, "This is the attendant at the State Mental hospital, has Arthur been telling one of his stories?! We're so sorry, he does this every time he breaks out of his room! Arthur, you have been a very bad patient! Whack, whack! Owwwww!" Click!

The phone jokes were good for grins for about an hour. But we ran out of ideas. Suzie wanted to try, but you can hear she's a little kid. Jeff told her to look up a number in the phone book, and he'd think of something new. She underlined a number. He dialled.

Ring ring. "Hello?" Jeff put on his deepest voice: "Hello, you don't know me, but I know you. I know what you do to your kids."

A long wait.

"Who are you?!"

"It doesn't matter who I am. What does matter is the fact that every newspaper, every radio and TV station, will know tomorrow morning what you do to your kids."

Click!

"Hey, man," I said, "That was pretty cold. That's going too far."

"Who gives a flying fig?" sneered Jeff. We both started yawning, so we called it a night.

The next day was dry, so I rode my bike to school. It's two miles. About halfway there, I was tooling along a nice street, lawns of real grass and fresh painted houses, birdies chirping in the trees and the sun making rainbows in lawn sprinklers. I was feeling pretty good. I passed this real ordinary house, and the light glinted off something on the sidewalk, and I had to swerve to keep from running over a line of thick red oil running from the closed garage down into the street. I stopped and looked at it, and this bald man next door opened his garage door to pick up his paper and pick his nose. He saw me looking, so he came over and looked too.

He asked, "What's that stuff, transmission fluid?" I said I guess so. He said, "Boy, if McCartles blew a gasket in his car, he's gonna have a stroke. He keeps that thing clean enough to lick, isn't that right?" He was about to put his finger in the fluid, but he stopped. We both stood there, thinking the same thing. It didn't look like oil. It looked like blood.

"Hey, I gotta get to school," I said. He said he'd check and see if everything was OK, so I took off.

School was a drag as usual. I rode the same way back to check out that house. It was surrounded by yellow and black police tape and nosy neighbors. That same bald guy was picking his nose when he saw me and yelled, "Hey, that's the kid who was here this morning! Looks like he had to return to the scene of the crime!" He gave out a laugh like a jackass. A woman with her hair in curlers at three in the afternoon hit him in the ribs with her elbow and whispered loudly, "Keep your voice down, he's just a teenager."

I sat on my bike and asked what was going on. Mr. Picker looked all around at the neighbors and rubbed his head until it was shiny. He told this story so many times today, he must have got it perfect. "He was the nicest guy you ever knew, isn't that right? I rang the doorbell and woke up his wife and kids. They said he was sleeping. But they checked and said he wasn't in bed all night long, so. We tried to see in the garage but the windows were too dusty, and she couldn't get the door open, so. After an hour prying around we called the fire department, and they put a crowbar to it. What a sight, isn't that right?" The curlier woman tried to grab his arm, but he was too warmed up to stop.

"What a sight. He hung himself by the ankles from the rafters, and he slashed both his wrists with a steak knife."

It's funny, but I don't remember riding the rest of the way home. I don't remember doing my homework. I don't remember what we had for dinner. All I remember is lying on my bed, thinking.

I called Suzie in and asked her who was the last person we called last night. She gave me her usual little kid dumb look that drives me crazy. "Hey, wake up, little Suzie!" I yelled at her. "Remember? Last night? You, me, Jeff? Phone jokes? Raymond? The Donkey? Bait the Attorney?"

Finally the light dawned. "Oh, those phone jokes. I don't remember. You never let me play anyway."

I chased her out and started looking through the phone book. And then it was my turn to feel dumb. I couldn't remember the name. It was Candles or Milk-toast or something odd. You know how it is, the harder you try, the less you remember. Then it popped into my head that Suzie had underlined the name. So all I had to do was look through the entire phone book. It was seven hundred pages long, I could scan a page every five seconds, so that came out to about one hour.

I threw the phone book in a corner and got into bed. What the hell, who cares anyway?

At two in the morning, I knew I wasn't getting any sleep until I found out. I turned on my fluorescent lamp, opened the phone book and started on Aaaaardvark Bookstore.

By two thirty, I found it. There was the name McCartles, underlined.

I couldn't call Jeff then, it would wake up his parents. At six in the morning, his line was busy. I took off early for school to be sure and catch him.

He was late as usual. I said we had to go somewhere and talk. Jeff has to make a joke out of everything, so he lisped in a high-pitched voice, "Oh, we have to stop meeting like this!"

"Listen up, Jeff, before I beat the crap out of you!"

"Oh, you're so cute when you're mad!"

I considered busting his fat face, but I just turned away and started walking. He decided ditching school was a good idea, so he chased after me and started telling a joke about four nuns who decide to confess their sins.

I heard the joke three dozen times already, so I finally told him, "Jeff, shut up for a minute! We got to turn ourselves into the police station!"

That really got him going. "I heard of a sorcerer who turned himself into an eagle, but I never heard of anyone turning himself into a police station! Hey, that reminds me. This alcoholic, this miser, and this faggot go to hell, but the devil gives them one more chance. They get to come back to earth, as long as they don't even think about their favorite sins ever again. They're walking down the street, and the alcoholic turns into a liquor store. Poof! He vanishes. Then the miser sees a penny on the sidewalk. He bends over to pick it up, and both guys vanish! Get it?"

Jeff's like the Energizer Rabbit. I had to just wait until he ran down. It took an hour. By then we were walking along a train track, stepping on the old cracked stained ties, kicking up gravel. The rails were starting to rust. No trains, no people anywhere near, and that suited me just fine.

I told him the whole story.

He didn't say anything for a second. I thought he had a streak of decency, enough to feel guilty or something.

Fat chance. Not Jeff. He yelled, "Hey, I get it!" and started laughing. He thought it was a joke.

Finally I put it to him outright. "It's our fault this guy killed himself. We gotta turn ourselves in."

Jeff wouldn't buy it. He gave me a hundred reasons why we should keep our mouths shut. He said if I told anyone, he'd say I was lying.

I wish I hadn't done it, but I busted him a couple of times in the face. It broke his glasses, and he got a bloody nose. He wouldn't talk to me all the way back.

Jeff wanted to make his last class, but I didn't feel like going back to school. I wandered around downtown. Bought a big fat meatball sandwich and fries for lunch, but felt like barfing after the first bite. Walked down auto row and checked out the sports cars, but they sure cost a lot. I got a headache. Found ten dollars in my pocket and stopped at the porno theater, but it was closed for remodelling. Turned the corner and was standing in front of the police station.

Everything Jeff said kept playing over and over like my mind was a stuck CD. We don't know a hundred percent for sure we called that same guy; if we did, it's not our fault he aced himself; if it was, who'd ever find out; if they did, who could ever prove it; if they could, it's no crime to use the telephone; if it was, no one would believe us; if they did, they'd stick us in juvenile for a few months and we'd flunk all our classes and have to take the year over and the guy's still dead, and who gives a flying fart anyway?

On the other side, I couldn't come up with much. You're supposed to always tell the truth. Turn ourselves in to the authorities and take the consequences. Sounds like something your parents are always whining.

I asked the cop at the desk if I could talk to an officer, and he asked if I wanted to report a crime, and I said I guess so, and he said sure if I could wait a few minutes.

I was sitting there wondering where the bathroom was and looking at the smudgy photos on the wanted posters when five cops and a lady cop came in with two little kids. Everyone in the place came out, cops in uniforms and some I guess plainclothes, I heard them say the name McCartles once or twice, somebody else started saying "Will you look at this, will you look at this," and somebody else said, "He got off too easy hanging upside down bleeding like a side of beef."

Nobody noticed I was still there. I snuck a peek. One of the cops was holding the little kid's shirt open, and he had fresh burns and old burns all over his chest, but no burns on his arms or face or neck where they'd show.

Nobody noticed when I left.

It took me a while to talk Jeff into coming over. He had a new pair of glasses, and his nose looked OK again. I apologized up one side and down the other, and finally he gave me a grin and said, "Hey, you saved me a thousand bucks for a nose job, maybe I can talk my old man into letting me put it into car insurance."

I said it was still bothering me. "I rode my bike by the guy's house, now that's a coincidence, but it's not that big a town. It's the other part. We call this guy in the first place, you tell him we know what you do to your kids, and it turns out he really is a child abuser."

"What's a child amuser?" asked Suzie.

I didn't even know she was listening at the door. "Get out of here!" I yelled.

Jeff said, "Someone who spanks their kids too hard."

"I knew that!" sneered Suzie. She gave us a know-it-all look and walked away.

I got to thinking again. We didn't pick the name out of the book, Suzie did. "Suzie, get back in here!"

We showed her the name she underlined in the book and asked her how she picked it. She shrugged and said, "It just felt cold, that's all."

Jeff and I looked at each other for a few thousand years. I felt the book, but there was nothing cold or hot or lukewarm or anything. I asked Suzie if she could find another cold name. She said sure, felt a few pages, and pointed at another.

I nodded at Jeff. He dialled the number.

Ring ring. "Hello, you don't know me, but I know you. I know what you do to your kids."

We waited. There was a weird kind of gasp. Someone was on the line, but they weren't saying anything. Finally a woman asked, "Who is this?"

Jeff said, "It doesn't matter. What matters is, by this time tomorrow, every newspaper in town, every radio and TV station will know what you do to your kids."

The woman started crying. She said, "I can't help it ... I swear I can't help it when they cry all day ... I love em so much ... I promised I'd get into treatment . . . this time I really mean it ... I swear I'll get into treatment . . . I'll call the clinic, I been meanin' to do that for a long time. I hear they got a 24-hour hot line."

Jeff looked weird. All of a sudden, he looked a lot older. First time I ever saw Jeff when he didn't know what to say. I grabbed the phone, and I spoke very slowly. "I'll know if you're telling the truth. By this time tomorrow, if you're not taking care of the problem, everyone will hear about it."

Click!

Jeff asked Suzie, "Can you find any other cold numbers?"

She felt a few more pages.

"Sure," she said. "There's a whole bunch!"

Suzie sat down next to me, and I put my arm around her. I looked at Jeff, and he nodded.

I guess a lot of sixteen-year-olds never had this feeling. Finding something worthwhile to do in your spare time. Sounds like something your parents are always whining about. Funny. It feels kinda all right.

Well, gotta go. We got a lot of numbers to call.

Ring ring!

Q



STEPSISTER

by Valerie J. Freireich

illustrated by George Barr

Danny dragged his feet as he came upstairs in answer to my call. I counted each step, thirteen of them, then listened as he traversed the narrow hallway to my room. He stood in the doorway, outlined in sunlight. "Come here," I said peremptorily, patting the place beside me on the bed. "Did Daddy give you cereal and your vitamins before he left for work?"

"Yeah. But I want to watch cartoons, Mom," he said.

"You can watch TV with me on the big bed."

He shuffled closer, then stopped out of my reach. Whatever it is I take from him, he'd sensed some loss.

"Don't you want to cuddle with me, Danny?" I asked.

He stared at the floor.

I stretched out my arms to him, ready to embrace. I could hear the pulsing rhythms of his young body, smell the aroma of his life on him. "I love you," I whispered, not in parody of emotions I don't possess, but rather a true statement of what I feel in the hollow places of my mind for those I need to fill that emptiness.

He looked up, saw me, the only mother he remembered. "Aw, Mom," he said. He came into my arms.

Beyond the sweetness of his essence, of his blood and flesh and bones, he smelled of fresh air and cleanliness, of spilled Cheerios and the random dirt that clings to small boys no matter how particular their mothers. There also was the tang of a fresh scrape across his knee, but I did my best to ignore that. His small head felt soft against my chest and the curve of it fit well beneath my chin. I let my arm slip down, to the tops of his thighs, and in one quick, smooth motion pulled him into the bed beside me. I squeezed him in a single fierce hug that took nothing at all, then relaxed my hold, but kept him trapped with my arm around his shoulders, beneath his head, circling back around, like a snake, to lightly press against his cheek.

"What do you want to watch?" I asked, reaching for the controller on the nightstand with my free arm. "Smurfs?"

"They're over." He wiggled just a bit, settling into position. He'd learned not to struggle.

I turned on The Chipmunks, those lucky beasts who'd found a convenient human home and fit in, oh, so well. Danny and I lay together. Gradually, like any six-year-old, he became absorbed in the cartoon drama. His body relaxed. I felt it, a melting beside me, and I waited, teasing myself, wondering how long before the next commercial.

My fingers stroked his face in exact time to my own complex rhythm, not so lightly that it would tickle, not heavy enough to hurt. I moved closer, so that we were pressed together the full length of his body. His pulse and mine began to interact, then unite in one cadence. I pulled him so near there was no space between us; he was half atop me, his shorter legs intertwined with mine. Mesmerized by the television and my accustomed presence, he barely sighed as I began to lick his neck. I felt the glow of satisfaction, the uncanny weightlessness of the transfer, which brought my strength.

Only rarely do I take anything physical, but there was the spice of his little scrape; after all, I thought, a child's skin is very thin, and children heal so easily and well. Danny gave a sharp intake of breath at the tiny puncture, but didn't flinch, I sucked a bit of his precious blood into my mouth, letting it rest there as I lay next to him, nearly senseless with delight. Then as I swallowed, I rolled away, not wanting to risk damaging his health by drinking any more. He turned slowly to look at me. He smiled, a beautiful little boy with dark brown hair and long-lashed green eyes.

"I'm going to take a shower. You can stay here or go downstairs, again," I said.

He resumed watching his television show, raising a hand to scratch his neck, as if at a mosquito bite. I turned away.

"How's my night owl?" Mark asked, coming back downstairs that night after tucking Danny into bed. "How late did you stay up last night?"

I didn't love Mark — that is, I didn't need him — but I rather liked him. We'd had some fun together. "Only until one. That book is trash, whatever the reviews said. I didn't even read it all." Last night's novel, all six hundred plus pages, lay face down on the messy coffee table, beside last night's can of budget diet cola.

"I thought you couldn't put anything down, once you got past the first twenty pages."

"I can't. So I just skipped the middle four hundred."

He laughed, then sat beside me on the couch.

"Have you noticed how much TV Danny's been watching lately?" Mark asked. "He used to play outside all afternoon; now it's video games and cartoons. I've been wondering if we should limit it."

I frowned, considering. The boy was still healthy, though perhaps a bit pale. Not anemic — not from me, anyway; I was extremely careful. Still, it could be Danny was weakening. I'd been with Mark and

Danny for two years, and hoped for several more, longer than special hugging was only supposed to be with me!" He stood, just visible on the bottom stair, in his Superman pajamas. Like an explosion, he began to cry and scream incoherent words at us. At me.

I was half on the couch and half off, where Mark had pushed me, ready to eat but not yet fed. Mark turned, staring at his son. I jumped to my feet and ran to Danny. I tried to speak, to say, "What's the matter?" like a solicitous mother, but I couldn't form the words around the taste of blood roiling through my mouth.

I reached the boy and knelt in front of him, pulling him into my arms, pressing his small head against my chest, feeling his tears. His sobs began to slacken immediately as the drone of the television and the contact with me began to have their usual effect. We meshed so perfectly, so easily compared with the botched effort with his father, that I lost myself in that sensation for a moment of deep feeding, taking from his insubstantial essence. I bent my head over him, licking at his face and neck, sensing the blood that tender skin encased, feeling the warmth.

A strong arm ripped me away before I'd finished. I looked up from a child's height at Mark. "Special hugging?" he shouted. He raised his arm as though to strike me. He stopped himself, but I cringed, he looked so like a furious giant.

"No!" Danny shouted, interposing himself between me and his father. "Don't hurt her! She needs me."

Oh, he was right! The need to put my arms around the boy was crippling any other thought or sensation. "Please," I moaned, reaching outward with my arms.

Mark looked as though he'd swallowed bile. "Get up," he said, pulling me farther from Danny, then he yanked me to my feet. "What the Hell kind of bitch are you, licking my son . . . ?"

I wrapped my arms around Mark's neck. He stumbled and together we fell to the floor. I heard Danny crying and ached to comfort him, to hold him close against me and take something away. His pain? I placed my mouth against the puncture I'd made earlier on Mark's neck, and teased it open with my tongue.

Mark swatted at me, then succeeded in disengaging me from his body. He was panting, a heavy beat I matched easily enough. I reached out a hand. He stared at me, part horror and part disbelief.

Danny grabbed my extended hand, and threw himself onto me, pushing me to the floor. "I love you, Mom," he wailed.

Perhaps it looked innocent enough; perhaps Mark was tired. He didn't respond as quickly as before. Danny fed me, warmed me with his willing energy. I loved him, for every moment that I squeezed upon his essence, extracting kernels of his being, savoring the pleasures of his soul.

When Mark pulled Danny off of me, the boy was limp. "What did you do?" he demanded, puzzled, since he hadn't seen me do anything at all but accept the

fragile weight of Danny's body on top of mine.



I rolled out of his reach and stood. "Nothing." My eyes dared him to contradict me. I had never felt so strong, never taken quite so much so rapidly, even during the quick, killing meals of the days when I fed on strangers.

He glanced down at the boy prone on the floor, then looked again, alarmed. "Is he all right?" Mark asked me, falling for the moment back into our well worn family roles.

I came closer. I could hear the faint hiss of Danny's breath. His lips moved as he mumbled something, but his eyes were closed and his face was slack. "I don't know," I whispered.

"What the Hell just happened here?" Mark said. I saw the question, the 'special hugging,' in his eyes.

"Never," I said. "It was . . . something else. Not sex. I swear."

He shook his head. "Never mind. Help Danny. Please. Help Danny if you can."

I didn't need either of them. I could leave. What could Mark say I'd done, even if the boy died? Yet, I didn't want Danny to die. I'd planned to leave these two long before he was weakened to this point.

Tentatively, I touched Danny's temple, felt the throbbing of the blood against the skin. Mark watched carefully, a hound ready to attack any false move.

My hand brushed against his cheek, then slipped down to his small neck.

There was so little there. Like empty cabinets, dreary and forlorn. I took my hand away.

"What are you?" Mark asked. "What did you do?"

I'd stolen something that I needed to keep myself alive. Something more fundamental to me than food and drink. Except, this time I hadn't stolen. Danny had given himself to me, and like a greedy guest I'd taken far too much.

I put my hand back against Danny's neck. I smelled the blood in him; it seemed thinner than before and the pounding more erratic. The soapy fragrance of his bath lingered on his skin. I bent closer, then stretched out alongside the still body, ignoring the sharp intake of breath from Mark. I matched Danny's new, slow rhythm easily enough, but nothing happened. There was nothing to draw from him, nothing left to take. I had it all.

Many have told me that they love me. *You're not bad*, Danny had said.

I was.

"I love him," I said. I felt tears, tasted the salt from them, remembered Danny's in the car. "I think I really do."

"Then do something! You're his mother!"

I pushed. I squeezed. I pressed. I forced something that was in me out, and that intangible force began to move. It was like reversing the flow of a water main; it seemed as perilous as driving against the traffic on a superhighway. It felt like giving birth.

I didn't stop until it was impossible for me to do more. I was exhausted. I lay on the floor with less in me than there had been at the beginning of the evening, yet I wasn't hungry. Beside me, Danny was awake and alert, but tranquil, preternaturally composed.

Mark was seated on the floor, facing me. "Thank you," he said, in the voice he used for strangers.

None of us moved for a while. I felt calm, unreasonably comfortable. Later, Mark took my hand. "What are you?"

"I don't know."

"When you did whatever it was you did just now, you seemed to glow. Your face, all of you seemed warmer, and you glowed."

"Danny needs to go to bed," I said. "He has school tomorrow."

Danny sat up. "No, I don't. It's Saturday."

"Time for bed anyway, tiger." Mark hugged his son, squeezing so tight I thought Danny would complain and break the serenity of my mood, but he didn't.

"Mom," Danny said, "will you be here in the morning?"

All the rhythms in the room stopped, waiting. I had no answer.

I stood up. I was lightheaded and felt myself sway. Mark caught me, steadying me. Our eyes met. "Of course she will," he said. "We'll tuck Mom in first; she needs it more. You go on ahead upstairs."

Danny ran off, full of vitality, so strong it was a pleasure to watch.

Mark stared at me. "Angel. The glow, the laying on of hands. You're an angel. You gave him back his life."

I laughed. I am, if anything, the opposite, a soulless wanderer who sucks bits of energy from the spirits of real people. Nevertheless, it was a good, a glorious feeling for once not to be lying or ashamed.

They put me to bed together; absurdly fussing over the covers, both of them touching me tenderly and without aversion. Danny kissed me good night. When Mark returned a few minutes later, he climbed into bed beside me and turned out the light. In the dark every gesture was defined by shifting springs and the sound of movement across sheets. Mark held me in his arms, not sex, not the other. "If you ever need to leave," he whispered, "you can always come back home again to us." **Q**

CANDELABRA

Candle's tallow scent, with
shivering flame, old portals
rent, muttered forbidden
name, thus mannas vent,
and elder shadows tame.

—J. W. Donnelly

THINGS FADE

Things fade
like green numbers from a screen
leaking from the corners of life

First a curtain, then the sill
Within a month the closet walls
are gone
And behind the hangers
There's nothing but a gray mist

Very soon it isn't even surprising
I cease to search for vanished things

So when the people start to go
It's just a minor, fleeting shock.

—Patricia Russo

THE BIBLE IN BLOOD

by Ian Watson

Illustrated by Jason Van Hollander

It was simplicity itself to let myself into Appledorn's hotel suite. The under-manager of the Strasbourg Hilton had provided me with a master card-key several days before Henry Appledorn checked in at the hotel. I'd replaced the security chain with one which would snap easily. The under-manager was a *sayan*, a friendly local who would readily assist Israeli intelligence. We can rely on thousands of such individuals in many countries.

Naturally, I hadn't told our French under-manager that I intended to confront Appledorn and his secretary and their visitor with a pistol in my hand. None of his business. He wasn't involved.

The Beretta fitted snuggly in my palm. Standard issue for Mossad field officers. .22 caliber. Loaded with dum-dum bullets.

In with the card-key. Turn the handle softly.

Ah yes, the occupants of the suite had chained the door.

Apply a shoulder. The links snapped.

"Don't anyone move," I said. "Don't make any noise." And I shut the door behind me.

On a chrome and glass table there rested a pile of parchment pages penned in Gothic script. The letters were all of a dark brown hue, the colour of dried blood. The open case and backbone formed a portfolio, for those sheets were looseleaf without any stitching or tailband as yet. Faded red silk ribbons would tie the portfolio shut. The case was bound in black leather with steel protectors at the corners. Though I couldn't see the front, its slight elevation from the glass of the table suggested that emblems embossed the surface. A steel cross, perhaps, and steel swastikas.

So there it was at last: the Bible Written in Blood.

To be strictly accurate, the *New Testament*. A good ninety-five per cent of the *New Testament*.

Not all of it. Herzwalde concentration camp had been evacuated, due to the approach of the Red Army, while the scribes were commencing their slow labour on the book of *Revelation*.

Our American bibliophile, Henry Appledorn, darted a protective glance at the huge, incomplete, unbound volume. Our book collector was tall and rangy, with a predilection to stoop. His curly hair had turned snowy, as befitted his seventy years. His was a Bassethound face, long and somewhat ruddy.

Despite my warning, Appledorn's hand strayed to touch the silk handkerchief in his breast pocket. Couldn't he conceive of his own death? Did my sudden intrusion merely offend him?

Ah, he was worrying whether I might cause blood to spurt on to the volume in question, staining it.

How quickly could he mop the parchment page clean with his handkerchief? What cleansing agents would distinguish between recently spilled blood and the older dried brown blood of the text?

Klaus Bauer, procurer of the volume from its hiding place in former East Germany, appeared to be calculating whether he might heave up the bulky tome to use as a shield — or to hurl at me, disarmingly.

Bauer was thick-set but whey-faced, as if he had shunned the sunlight for a long time. He looked so cleanly scrubbed with his large pink hands and shaven skull that he reminded me of a potato. His jacket and slacks were creamy and recently pressed.

The woman, Appledorn's secretary, avoided focusing on my gun.

"What are you?" she demanded. "An occultist?"

I'd been intending to order all three of them to lie prone on the carpet to allow me to inject each in turn, rendering them comatose, after which I would simply decamp with the book... .

Her question threw me. I had to know exactly what Gloria Cameron implied by it.

She was golden-haired, tweed-suited, her ruffled blouse trimmed with embroidered roses. Brown-leather brogues with brass buckles on her feet. Butch. Perceptive.

I imagined her equipped with a whip, and dressed in an impeccable SS uniform, striding through a camp of cowering women. I felt weak inside. My weakness became fury — and fascination.

Yet Gloria's accent was Scots, overlayed by a slight American veneer. She was a graduate of Edinburgh University, her speciality bibliography.

I ought to have carried out my plan by rote, ignoring distractions. However, within me — confronted at last by the Bible in Blood — my mother's dreams were stirring. And within those dreams lurked another person, namely my father....

Facts are never simple. Facts splinter into a kaleidoscope of interpretations.

Early in 1943 SS Colonel Gottfried von Turm became deputy commandant of Herzwalde labour camp. He was lame in the left leg. He'd been invalided back from the Russian front, from the doomed attempt to relieve the Nazi forces penned in Stalingrad.

From the jaws of hell — into a cauldron of death. Death cooked up by his own kind.

Yet were the other SS quite his own kind?

For a Prussian aristocrat to join the ranks of the fighting Waffen-SS was quite unusual. The Waffen-SS were superhuman . . . *scum*. For the most part they were brutal peasants — trained to be Übermenschen. Their military officers lacked the most elementary sense of tactics, though they knew how to rampage, and SS fighting units always had better weapons than the regular army.

Gottfried had once implied to my mother (or at least she took him to be implying) that he'd been obliged

to join this band of butchers so as to protect his own family from some ambiguous fate.

Soon after Gottfried arrived at Herzwalde, he conceived the project of the Bible in Blood.

That camp housed, among many other unfortunates, a fair salting of rabbis and other Jewish *Intelligenzen* — unphysical men for whom the forced labour of quarrying stone and logging in the surrounding forests was especially lethal on top of the starvation rations, the beatings, shootings, the interminable freezing rollcalls.

Jews had committed *bloodcrime* by murdering the Saviour. Why, the mere existence of Jews constantly posed a genetic blood-threat to the purity of the Aryan race.

Especially in the eyes of the SS the pure blood that coursed through the veins of the German peasant was sacred.

Had not Alfred Rosenberg proclaimed a mystic philosophy of blood as the true Germanic faith? Had not Hitler endorsed this crazy sanguinarianism? Was not the SS a new priesthood of blood?

So therefore Colonel von Turm ordained that the most noteworthy rabbis and eggheads should be gathered together in a special blockhouse. There, they should redeem their bloodcrimes and purge their *verfluchte Judentum* by writing out the whole of the *New Testament* in their own lifeblood.

Was this a monstrous joke on his part? A malicious insult to the prisoners? Certainly, other SS personnel took it as such, applauding Gottfried's wit.

True, at first I believe there was *some* dispute with his superior or his fellow officers. Had not the Fuhrer wished to erase Christianity in favour of a revived Odinic paganism? Ah, but not even Hitler could afford to offend the church too deeply. Besides, many of the SS peasantry had been deeply branded in boyhood with Catholicism.

Later on, those SS in Herzwalde would become quite fanatic in a darkly superstitious vein about the progress of the project. It seemed to them as though this scriptural work was obliterating the very essence of the Hebrew race in a magical fashion —just as they themselves were occupied in annihilating the physical existence of Jews.

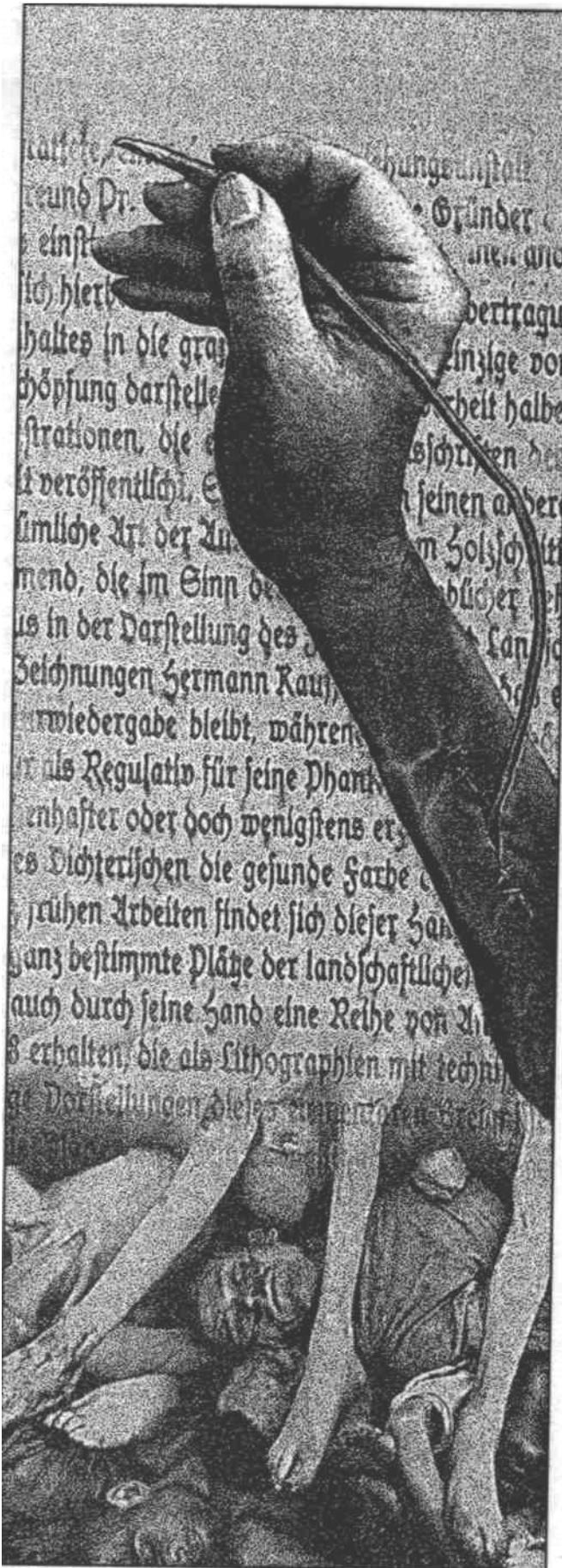
Now, this was bound to be a long, slow project. For how much blood could easily be siphoned from the veins of the scribes by those scribes themselves? How quickly would the bloodink congeal? What type of pennibs should best be used? How to ensure compatibility of calligraphy? How could the work best be divided so that costly parchment was not wasted by, for example, the *First Epistle to the Corinthians* ending at the top of one sheet, while the *Second Epistle* had already been started by a different scribe at the top of another sheet? And in the event of empty spaces, what decorative motifs should be employed to fill up the gaps? Swastikas? Death'sheads pierced with daggers? Crucifixions? Taunting pastoral scenes of Palestine?

These were exactly the kind of minutiae which obsessed the intellects of the SS who operated concentration camps. A hundred petty laws and prohibitions! With a savage whipping or hanging as punishment for infringement.

The Colonel played upon this savage pedantry.

What if the chosen Jews' blood was *anaemic* due to the scanty rations of watery garbage soup, black ersatz coffee, and stale bread?

Very soon the scribes' diet was being boosted with sausages and cheese from incoming parcels which the SS always stole (though they might occasionally let the wrapping paper be delivered), and with fresh fruit and eggs and rabbit stew.



What if the scribes' fingers were too numb to hold the pens skillfully enough to form the Gothic letters Gottfried insisted upon?

Why, two stoves must be kept well fuelled in the Scripture Block.

While the band of scribes regained some body weight and bloomed with renewed health, other less literate inmates of Herzwalde carried on labouring and dying of hunger and illness and beatings.

Aha! Was the Scripture Block—aside from being an insult to the faith of those within — also a cunning ploy to make its inmates resented and hated by other prisoners? The SS, permanently poised on the brink of capricious rage at Untermenschen, may have thought in this vein. *"See how those precious rabbis and eggheads grow fat while you become bones!"* In actuality, most residents of squalid, bestial Herzwalde had no surplus energy to spare for hatred. They hardly had enough energy to spare for conscious thought at all.

As I've said, the majority of the SS had no sense of *tactics* — Might it be that Colonel Gottfried von

Turm was in fact preserving, in his Scripture Block, the cream of Jewish people, the intellectual and spiritual leadership, for some postbellum salvation? Such an idea never crossed the minds of his boorish colleagues. Still, Gottfried must prevent any such notion from arising there — or taking root in the brains of his clever beneficiaries. Like some mystic high priest of the satanic Schutzstaffel he would rant about sacred and polluted blood.

Many of the assembled Rabbis, for their part, were knowledgeable about Kabalah. They knew the *Sepher Yesirah*, the Book of Creation, inside out, and the *Zohar* of Moses de Leon. They murmured while they dipped their pens in their own blood and copied the scripture of their oppressors....

"What do you mean, Miz Cameron?"

The woman stared at me witheringly. So I jerked the Beretta towards her tweed-clad knees, threatening to cripple her unless words danced upon her lips.

Why hadn't Appledorn let her handle the acquisition of the book? Why did *he* need to be present personally at the handover in this hotel suite in Strasbourg, here on the FrancoGerman border? So that he could authenticate his purchase by smell and by feel and by sixth sense?

Suppose he had stayed behind in Florida . . . maybe the plane winging the book back to the States might have plunged into the Atlantic en route. It might have crashed on arrival at Orlando airport, incinerating the unique pages....

Appledorn had to take control of the book right away.

What did he plan to do with it thereafter?

I'd assumed that he would lock it up along with other bibliographic treasures, reserved for his eyes only.

Now I wondered whether this was all he intended.

"Does your boss plan to complete the Bible?" I demanded. "Using whose blood? *Your own?*"

Gloria Cameron twitched.

"Do you intend to finish the book of *Revelation*, Mister Appledorn?" I harangued, sounding rather like a camp guard myself. "What *revelation* do you expect to achieve?"

Klaus Bauer stared from one to the other of us in bemusement. And with greedy regret. Had he somehow underestimated the value of the Bible in Blood to this collector?

Bauer asked me in German in a wheedling tone, "Are you one of the faithful?"

The faithful? The *faithful*? I hadn't heard this expression before. Did it refer to Judaism — or was it some neoNazi code? Did Bauer imagine that I wished to spirit the book away to some Hitlerian shrine? To some revived Wewelsburg Castle?

Bauer annoyed me. I shunned any conceivable association between himself and me. I wished him to sweat.

"I'm Israeli intelligence," I told him.

"Why," asked Gloria Cameron, "would Israeli intelligence wish to kidnap a *book*?"

Well, of course we wouldn't . . . unless the action served Israel's interests . . . which it hardly could, unless Kabalists were running our country.

"I ask the questions," I retorted.

Whether due to the strain of the occasion — this climax to a long search - or on account of sheer proximity to the book, my mother's dreams came welling up in me. . .

SS Colonel worn Turm limped, using a silverhandled walking cane. With this he would lash out at the occasional tattered slave who didn't step smartly enough to one side and pull off his beret swiftly enough from his cropped cranium.

In fact, the Colonel never *damaged* any slave worker with his cane — unlike other SS who would beat an inmate to death. Perhaps he was concerned about snapping his walking cane. Perhaps not. A lick from the stick was equivalent to a shot of electric current in a moribund frog's leg. It galvanized the walking

dead. They survived a little longer.

Von Turin's eyes were an icy blue. The ice of Russian winter; the ice of Prussian disdain.

He was wellfleshed.

He too needed to relieve the strain of the occasion ... and maybe do something extra by way of lagniappe, as they say down Appledorn's way or thereabouts.

One afternoon, since it was freezing cold, the SS decided to order a new intake of women to stand naked on parade while they chose which to assign to the brothel block, which to the quarries, which to extinction. The women had been marched forty kilometres from their previous work camp, relocated to fulfill some whim or bureaucratic quota. Those who had survived the trek were desperately tired. Therefore, with the crops of their whips, the SS lifted the girls' tits to determine who was firm enough for brothel duty.

Aryans for the SS guards and for visiting soldiers. Jews for the common criminals who had become overseers of slaves.

Exercising the caprice of rank, and rather in breach of SS protocol, Von Turm ordered that my mother, Bella, should be sent to him for his use that evening. For she stood proudly. A tall, skinny waif, a starveling with large brown eyes and shaven head.

His quarters were beautifully furnished with loot, including a fine fourposter bed. On a table was set a carafe of milk, a bowl of sauerkraut, and a dish of meats and cold creamed potatoes. Bella, who was starving, only allowed herself one tormented glance at the Colonel's supper. And at his silk sheets.

"Undress," he said; and she shed a torn, soiled frock.

"You're too thin for me," he remarked, and terror seized her.

But then he tossed her a silk bathrobe. From a drawer he produced a lavish black wig for her to wear while she was in his room.

"You must eat first," he told her. "Do not eat quickly, or else you might vomit. Chew slowly. Drink slowly. Then you must sit and digest your meal."

Only an hour after she had finished feasting did he take Bella to bed, to relieve his tensions. Though he hardly spoke to her.

I could hear the percussion of a thousand wooden shoes on stone; and the squelch of a thousand feet tramping through slush and mud. I saw watchtowers and wire and roving searchlights. I listened to the chatter of bullets. I watched skeletal marionettes in striped pyjamasuits dangle upright for hours on end on parade from the invisible strings of their exhaustion. Strings snapped; marionettes collapsed in snow, in mud. I flinched from snarling dogs, whose teeth sheer hunger persuaded me were rows of almonds. I breathed the filth of the latrine abyss in the shit-house, surrounded by slippery, excremental steel bars on which to perch one's bum and vent the gruel of diarrhoea upon a million dissolving turds and the rotting corpses of those who had previously slipped backwards and drowned. The swollen tongues of hanged men on the gallows were blue, and looked delicious, like cured meat.

And I heard the rabbis mutter in their blockhouse as they copied the words of that loving Christian religion to which the world seemed to owe the massacre of the Albigensians, the Crusades, the Inquisition, the slaughter of witches and heretics, and the pogroms and the ghettos, because the blood of the Jew Jesus had been spilt; as they penned the holy words of their victimisers in their own heartblood

...

Gottfried reserved Bella for himself alone. As the months passed by she grew sleek.

No doubt the Colonel concocted some spurious excuse to exonerate himself in the eyes of his fellow officers from the scandal of taking a Jewess as — effectively — his mistress. Those officers were by now much tickled with the Bible in Blood project, the Colonel's inspiration, so they regarded this other eccentricity of his with amusement, even addressing Bella as "Fraulein", although she continued to reside in the Brothel Block.

How did Bella respond to Gottfried's embraces?

At first woodenly, of course, exhaustedly, obediently — reserving within herself a kernel of her own dignity.

Yet presently ... ah, the situation became fraught with ambiguity.

Von Turm remained taciturn towards her. How could he be otherwise? He could hardly involve her directly as a coconspirator against the ethics of the Schutzstaffel. Nevertheless, Gottfried's *body* seemed to speak to her in that fourposter bed.

True, when one's entire fate depended upon the whims of a powerful individual who belonged to an insane organisation, one might search excessively for auguries. What did a frown portend? Or a grunt? What did the exact pressure of his hand upon the breast, compared with yesterday, imply? And the rhythm of his cock, or a gasp during orgasm?



Or a seeming delay of orgasm... ? Gottfried nursed Bella towards her own excitement by a bodily insistence that she should, she *must*, surrender herself to him sensually, now that her senses were back in working order due to better diet. This might merely be a further kind of oppression.

Yet she intuited that he would not reject her.

She was, to him, someone chosen especially to cherish—in his own bodily style. She was a person as well as an exemplar for the expiation of guilt — as well as someone symbolically saved from the slaughter in the way that he had saved some rabbis and eggheads.

She was the *personalization* of his act of charity or dictate of conscience. Thus it was entirely necessary that she should be, to him, an individual person. Always his body spoke more about his mood than his lips ever did ... which led to that superstitious search for auguries.

Sometimes Bella felt furious that she was allowing him to unburden himself thus of bad conscience—that through sex she was shriving him to some degree. What did it really count that one Jewess was surviving through his *tactic* while thousands of others died? But she did not choose to reject her salvation.

She would never cry out to him, "I love you." In this mad place what sense would such a declaration make? Yet what did her body tell him? On the night when for the first time she climaxed, clutching him, digging fingernails into the firm flesh of this officer, he had flicked a cigarette lighter alight — no, he had *not* switched on a blinding lamp. And he had scrutinised her face briefly while she stared at him open-eyed; and he had nodded.

A true communication? Or only another evasive augury?

Nor did she imagine that any possible future could exist — for her, or for him.

With restored health, her halted periods had resumed. Late in 1943 she became pregnant by him an event which at first caused her a renewed pang of terror.

Would he blame her — as surely as if she had smuggled a knife into his bed, in the way that a truly *brave* victim might have done?

As for bravery, how many other prisoners in the camp had the energy even to contemplate such a suicidal, stupid act? In any case, she had those rabbis to think of... Von Turin's murder or mutilation would probably mean their elimination, not to mention her own flogging to death.

First and foremost, Bella's own body had already promised Gottfried something other than a knife in the night —

Would he accuse her of having polluted him by allowing his seed to take root in her womb?

Indeed not. She would take extra vitamins. She would give birth in the Brothel Block — though he would not be present at such an event. She would rear her babe — though he would not see it — and she would continue to visit him.

Even this was within the gamut of SS caprice.

It could be done. For her. While others starved and died.

So I was born in the Midsummer of 1944. Herzwalde camp collapsed into chaos in March of the following year. The rabbis had barely begun work on the book of *Revelation*, yet it seemed that the prophecies of Armageddon were already coming true, prematurely.

A bomb, one of several stupidly dropped on the concentration camp, killed Colonel von Turm. The bombing killed prisoners too, but only one German, Gottfried. Yet obviously the end was nigh. Therefore the SS assembled the ablebodied to march them westward; and among the ablest bodied were those rabbis and eggheads of the Colonel's project, and of course Bella with me in her arms. In such circumstances I was a burden, yet one which the SS allowed out of some perverse sentiment towards their dead deputy commandant.

Chaos begat chaos as the sinews of lunacy stretched and snapped. Overnight, at a transit stockade previously used for cattle, the SS all decamped without troubling to machine-gun those they had escorted thus far.

Bella fled. Presently she found herself wandering with a band of other anonymous women, reduced to the status of tramps, starving herself to supply me with half-masticated, scavenged food which she spat

into my mouth in the way that a mother bird feeds its hungry, squalling nestling.

Unluckily, those tramps fell in again with other ex-inmates of Herzwalde who knew exactly who Bella was. They beat Bella savagely as a mistress of a Nazi tormenter, for she had prospered while they suffered.

Though her injuries were patched up, Bella died of pneumonia.

Somehow, a nun took me to a camp for displaced persons. She only knew that I was Jewish, and was called David.

In that more benign camp, a miraculously reunited couple by the name of Abramowicz adopted me. Martha Abramowicz had been sterilised in a medical experiment, but had survived. As had Levi, her husband. I was their second miracle, a son.

Eventually the Abramowiczes reached Palestine, and Palestine became Israel. Ultimately I became a *katsa* of the Mossad, dedicated to foxing the enemies of Israel.

In lieu of other nourishment during the days of wandering, my mother may have told me tales. I would have needed to be preternaturally precocious to understand those tales — unless my memory was a perfect sponge, the incomprehensible contents of which could be stored for later retrieval, decoding, and interpretation.

Might this be partly the explanation? My memory is indeed remarkably retentive.

At puberty, I began to dream my mother's memories of Herzwalde. . . . These weren't exactly *horrifying* — not in the sense that I would wake up screaming. Rather, it seemed as though nightly I was engaged in a game, a game which dark gods played with people. The camp with its great rows of huts, its outer and inner wire fences, its watchtowers, latrines, kitchens, gallows, its special blocks, its SS residencies, its warehouses of loot, all, all this was an intricate and fascinating gameboard, a lifeboard and deathboard far more complex than any chessboard. Pyjama-clad pawns and grey-uniformed knights and bishop-rabbis and many other categories manoeuvred there. Also, I glimpsed certain evasive pieces which seemed to bear no correspondence to ordinary reality. I called these the Sphinx, the Angel, the Harpy, and the Clown; though what they were I could not tell.

The more that I experienced the manoeuvres, the more did it seem that some higher scheme presided over the camp. Some higher plan was emerging, ghostlike — in the manner of a vast message writ in invisible ink revealing itself line by line, under the stimulus not of warmth but of wretched death.

The final revelation of that message would be cataclysmic, yet potent, wrought of ultimate despair and prayer and conjuration.

Despair, yes despair. Despair that God might no longer be present in such a hell as the camp; that the camp represented an *absence* of God, a gap within Creation, a mad void where aberrant entities such as the Harpy and the Clown could caper, where the Sphinx and the Angel could construct themselves. Apocalyptic creatures! Yet not the banal Four Horsemen of Saint John, those projections of paranoia, jealousy, and vengeance. Something much more *interesting*.

Nevertheless, Godpower could still be summoned. Thus the Creator might be recalled into existence.

With the abandonment of Herzwalde, what became of the almost completed Bible in Blood?

The scribes didn't carry it away with them on their forced march. Nor was Gottfried von Turm alive to salvage it.

I spent many years — whilst engaged on other enterprises in Europe as a Mossad operative — in tracking down rumours of that legendary book which now lay spread open before me.

Surviving Rabbis (their faith reinforced, or else forsaken) and eggheads alike were distinctly reticent about their part in the affair, as though an oath of enduring secrecy bound them. . . .

For they had murmured over that book, uttering what were virtually incantations; and something strange and potent — yet abortive — had happened in that icy February of 1945, as Soviet forces fought their way progressively closer. It was something other than the seeming approach of Armageddon for the Third Reich. It was something connected with the prisoners' apprehension that they might all be summarily liquidated by a Germany in retreat. It was something which might magically *protect* the residents of the Scripture Block more effectively than Colonel von Turm, (If indeed they realized that he was their protector. The witness of survivors, on this point, ranged from incredulity to stubborn silence).

In my mother's fragmented memories, welling within me, was a hint of what this strange, potent, yet finally fruitless event had been. Only a hint.

Her *Gottfried* certainly knew more about it. Gottfried, of whom I was half. Yet that half remained veiled within *her* remembrance.

The rumour-web had finally attracted a spider, a spinner of cocoons in which to store prizes, a collector of bibliographic bizzarerie in the stooping shape of Henry Appledorn.

The German Democratic Republic had at last given up the ghost. In the process it yielded up all manner of monsters, including untold archives stored in secret cellars by the Stasi, those Marxist successors to the Gestapo. Out-of-work intellectuals were being hired to catalogue the morass of paper.

Whoever found the Blood Bible lurking in a Stasi crypt obviously realized its oddity,

thus its potential value. Sufficient to buy a fine Mercedes, or several? He, or she, sequestered the volume for themselves, during this time of confusion, and put out feelers. . . .

Or perhaps our investigative entrepreneur Klaus Bauer himself discovered, from ageing ex-SS contacts, where the volume might have ended up under the Communist regime — as an unclassifiable curiosity which it might be prudent to keep hidden — and then he bribed the new custodians of the Stasi crypts.

The Stasi had often been chary about releasing Nazi documents or films from store to assist international quests for justice against Nazis. For thus they might be assisting that creature of America, the Zionist state. Colonel von Turm was dead, way beyond prosecution for war crimes. Better to keep such a weird anomaly as the Blood Bible stored in secrecy, if indeed the Stasi understood exactly what it was. Maybe they never really believed any scraps of testimony that they gathered. Maybe they viewed awareness of the book as potentially dangerous, a possible focus for neo-Hitlerian blood-dreams of unregenerate Nazis who had bored bolt-holes into the woodwork of the Bundesrepublik next door.

What Gloria Cameron had let slip made me realize that Henry Appledorn was no mere eccentric, ardent bibliophile. Unlike Bauer, he must be at least somewhat aware of the *event* which had occurred in Herzwalde during the final days.

Might he know *more* than I did? Had one of the surviving eggheads, after emigrating to America, then perhaps lapsing into poverty in his old age, told Appledorn an incredible story? Did Appledorn, himself confronting old age with disapproval, fancy himself as a Magus?

As a good *katsa* of Mossad, I was thoroughly accustomed to running scenarios of disinformation and duplicity through my mind, just as I was used to adopting false identities so that I could be one person one day, then another the next day.

Ha! I wouldn't be a good *katsa* much longer — not after acquiring the volume. I would be a disappeared, absconded *katsa*.

"I said, Miss Cameron, what do you expect from the book? What have you two heard about it? Come on, Mr Appledorn." I smiled at him. "I'm prepared to shoot one or both of you. The woman first, I think, to prove my intentions. Then you, Sir." With my free hand, I pulled out the hypodermic syringe. To allow them some hope, I explained, "I was merely intending to put you all to sleep with a jab. Now I may have to shoot you."

Miss Cameron licked her lips. "The noise will attract attention. You won't escape with the book."

"Oh, I think this is quite a soundproof suite. We are on what, the tenth floor? I happen to know that the rooms on either side and over the way are vacant. If any passing maid reports a problem, I'm sure that the under-manager of this hotel will cause all kinds of delay."

Thus I burned my *sayan*, but that didn't matter.

"Tell him what he wants, Herr Appledorn," begged Bauer in a cowardly tone.

A moment later Bauer launched himself at me, with a leap like a German Shepherd dog.

He knocked my gunhand down as I swung to fire. The first bullet must have passed through his jacket, but the second caught him, knocking him back from grappling with me; and I had stabbed him with the needle too....

Appledorn uttered a bellow of affront—for the first bullet had passed aslant into the book, exploding outward through the rear board and the thick glass of the table beneath. The glass cracked into several jagged panes which nevertheless hung together. A hole bored down through the pages.

Gloria Cameron uttered a different, tremulous kind of cry.

For the top page—of *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* — had begun to bleed....

Red blood welled upward from the wound in the parchment just as though the heat of my bullet had reliquified the long-dried gore of the letters.

Bauer staggered aside, clutching at his hip. Part of his flesh had been blown away. He shook his head as the drug began to work on him.

That couldn't possibly be *his* blood on the book.

Bauer collapsed on a sofa. He was irrelevant now.

Through that tunnel torn in the book a wind began to whistle, the shriek of a wintry gale — which fast became lower in pitch, a vibrant powerful moan, as if the tunnel was fast widening.

And it was so. It was so.

The Cameron woman cried out again; and so, I think, did I.

A fissure opened through the book — a chasm.

A gulf that, howling, invaded the room, abolishing the furnishings and walls and the long, curtained window.

In their place was a cold dark river. A broad river. Little ice floes spun along it. Its banks themselves were gentle enough, but across the water indefinable walls and buildings mounted towards a steep ridge crowned by a long sombre fortress and a bulky cathedral. The Moon offered some illumination. Sparks of torchlight flickered here and there like stars fallen to Earth....

I recognized those silhouettes on the ridge — even though they seemed strangely incomplete. Surely this was Prague. The river, the Vltava. The Cathedral must be that of St Vitus. The fortress could only be

Hradcany Castle. . . . Yet it was a Prague of long ago. And in the winter, in the small hours of some morning.

Behind me, a jumble of buildings packed together in the obscurity. Jews' Town.

Three men laboured on the riverbank near the flood of wintry water. They were stooping, scooping, moulding handfuls of clay and mud....

Had Appledorn and Gloria Cameron been sucked here too? I seemed to sense their presence. I myself was bodiless, a floating point of view, an invisible naked mind, a spirit.

Two of the men by the water were dressed in homespun doublets and leggings, soiled by the clay. The third, a white-bearded man with a curious cap on his head, wore a cloak.

With their bare hands they were moulding a body from the stuff of the riverbank. . . .

I knew who they must be. I could sense it.

They had to be none other than Rabbi Yehuda Low ben Bezalel, and his son-in-law, and his trusted pupil. They were trying to make the golem, the artificial man of great strength who would police the ghetto which clustered close by.

Christian trouble-makers would smuggle a murdered Christian child into the ghetto, wrapped in a sack, as a pretext to utter the blood-accusation against Jewry and thus launch a vindictive, brutal pogrom.

The Golem was designed to haul such villains to justice.

Had this manufacture of a Golem ever really happened? Or had it only occurred in the realm of myth — a myth so powerful that many people nevertheless believed it? Jews turned to this myth for consolation in the dark hours of their despair. Even in the late twentieth century pious pilgrims visited Low's lion-carved sarcophagus in the overcrowded Jewish cemetery to toss written appeals into his tomb, hoping for wonders.

Now this legendary event was happening before my gaze.

With his finger the Rabbi was drawing a face on the recumbent, lifeless clay-man.

"May the angel Metatron guide us," murmured the pupil. I could understand his words. Cautiously he asked his mentor, "Rabbi, will the Golem really borrow a soul from the domain of preexistence?"

Rabbi Low paused. "Only a crude soul," he replied. "Our Golem will be speechless. Dumb. Without human words, always. Yet it will understand, and obey."

The Rabbi's son-in-law plainly felt qualms too, at this final moment. "Aren't we trespassing on God's prerogative?"

Low mused. "The Divine Wisdom was obliged to become *creative*," he reminded them, "so as to justify His own existence to Himself. Man was formed in His image. Now Man must needs create too, all be it on a humbler scale."

Aye, desperate expedients for desperate times.

The three men whispered together.

Then Yehuda's son-in-law began to walk around the clay man, reciting as he did so a code of letters from the Hebrew alphabet.

"Aleph ... Vau... Aleph... Heth ... Jod..."

He circuited the clay body seven times — "Heth ... Samekh . . . He. . . Tav ... Pe.. . He. .. Nun ..." — and as he walked, so the body of clay began to glow ruddily as an inner fire was stoked.

Next it was the turn of Yehuda Low's pupil to pace around the body, uttering other permutations of Hebrew letters.

This was Kabalah.

True Kabalah. Pious Kabalah.

Sacred magic.

With a carved block of wood, Yehuda stamped a word upon the Golem's hot brow.

I could read the word. The word was *emeth*, meaning "true." Erase the first letter, and "true" would turn into "dead."

Into the Golem's mouth Yehuda pushed a piece of paper on which he had written the secret name of God. This piece of paper was the *Shem*, the program for the Golem. Remove the *Shem* from the Golem's mouth, and the artificial man would collapse back into clay.

Icy water swirled against the glowing body. Steam wreathed it. From the Golem's fingers nails sprouted. From its head hair grew.

In chorus, the three men recited: "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul."



With this last phrase, I felt myself being sucked towards the Golem — as if *I* was to be the soul that inhabited it!

As if my own soul was to animate that clay body and march obediently around the ghetto, unable to exert my own will, impotent to protest! Obeying orders numbly until some day when the *Shem* was removed from my mouth!

I fought.

I sought purchase with my nonexistent fingers and toes on the very air.

As I slid ever closer to entombment and a terrible oblivion, at the last moment the Golem opened its eyes. The pulling ceased; I was gently repelled.

The Golem arose.

"Your name," Yehuda said to it, "is Joseph."

And Joseph nodded.

"You are to guard us from harm, Joseph," the rabbi told it.

Snow began to tumble, slanting through the air.

Snow swirled, blanking out the scene. I could see nothing but tempestuous white flakes.

When these flakes cleared, instead of a river bank there were rows of wooden huts and roads of frozen mud. In place of a distant steeple, a watchtower A searchlight stabbed out from its summit, cutting whitely through the night. In the distance, a whistle blew. From much further away — maybe sixty kilometres away — came a faint percussive thump of artillery....

My mother's memories were alive....

Within those memories stood Colonel von Turm.

I had leapt from her to him at last.

"Ich bin Gottfried," I told myself.

Yet what did I know of my identity? Though I probed, yet I could not penetrate. I was only a wraith, wrapped around this person. Of Gottfried's youth, his motives, his attitude to Bella: nothing. He might as well have been an animated man of clay, who could articulate nothing of his thoughts and feelings to me: I only knew what he did.

Resting his weight on his silver-handled cane, he stood surveying one nearby blockhouse. Within, a faint ruddy light glowed as if a dull brazier was lit in there. The Colonel had thrown a long leather coat over the shoulders of his grey uniform. Several helmeted SS guards were with him, toting their machine-pistols.

When they burst into the Scripture Block and illuminated it, almost all of the rabbis and eggheads proved to have quit their tiered wooden bunks. They thronged the floor space. Their Kapo was doing nothing about the situation.

Now, this particular hut wasn't as claustrophobic as most. It wasn't a sardine can. Space existed, for uniquely these slaves laboured in their own quarters. The far end of the hut housed a worktable surrounded by rickety chairs.

On that table lay the Bible in Blood. The letters on the open pages of parchment glowed ruddily, luridly luminous with inner light.

At the sudden intrusion, a murmuring of many voices ceased except one which continued to recite defiantly, insistently, "And man became a living soul. . . ."

From beside the table a naked corpse arose. Its skin was grey as wrapping paper. Its blue lips were bared in a rictus, exposing clenched stained teeth.

Obviously a corpse. Its sunken eyes were closed. On its brow was printed, in blood, a Hebrew word.

Emeth.

"And man became a living soul...."

Its tongue, protruding through its teeth, had shrivelled to a white leaf.

No! That was no tongue.

That was . . . the *shem*.

The mud outside was frozen. Evidently the prisoners had smuggled in a corpse from another hut, or more likely from the charnel heap. Was not man's flesh made of clay? To clay, returning? Was this dead body not therefore equivalent to clay?

"... a living soul, to be our protector, our guardian under God!"

The zombie-Golem opened its eyes, eyes that stared blankly. It began to cavort, windmilling its arms.

As the SS guards clove a pathway for the Colonel many prisoners scrambled into bunks or clung to the sides of those bunks like panicked monkeys.

By now the Bible had ceased glowing.

Gottfried stared at the scarecrow of a Golem, which turned now to face him.

"Kill it," he ordered his men.

Guns racketted.

The Golem's parchment skin tore, yet bullets seemed simply to pass through it. It rocked, but it did not fall. Its flesh burst, bloodlessly, but its bones could have been made of steel. Or of rock, of fossilised bones.

"Cease fire!"

The Golem still stood, swaying.

Gottfried stared at it... as though now he understood.

Some of the prisoners were moaning—not because they were afraid of a terrible punishment, but as if appalled at what they had achieved. Or halfachieved. A multitude of needle tracks in all of their arms kept tally of the blood they had yielded up repeatedly, day after day.

They had lost courage.

One of the eggheads cried out cravenly to the Colonel, "Take the *shem* from its mouth, Sir!"

Gottfried stood right before the Golem, although his men were hesitant.

It jerked. It froze again. Why should it attack this Colonel, who was a perverse — or honourable — protector of these prisoners?

Then it spoke — opening its vile teeth. At last it spoke. Or croaked.

"Ich bin Joseph," it uttered. The *shem* lolled on its blue tongue like a long communion wafer.

Gottfried reached, and yanked the scrap of parchment from its mouth — so that the Golem lolled upright, motiveless, like any common or garden prisoner on parade who would soon die.

The Colonel spat on his glove, and smudged out the first letter of the word on the creature's brow. Oh he knew, he knew the tricks of the Jews!

The corpse collapsed. Its spirit had fled.

And so must I. For suction tore at me.

"Father!" I cried. "Tell me! Tell me!" Tell me so many things that you never told my mother. . . .

But that inhalation from elsewhere was overwhelming me, as if the very bellows of the world were breathing me in.

"Aitch-Jay!" cried Gloria Cameron. Our bibliophile hunched, lolling, spittle on his lips.

The book on the smashed glass table bled no more. There was no longer any wound from which it could bleed. The torn parchment had resealed itself like living flesh possessed of an amazing power of regeneration, a facility as considerable as that of the Golem itself.

Bauer was dozing, while blood continued to leak from his side through his clothes to stain the sofa.

"Aitch Jay!"

Henry Joseph Appledorn, of course.

It struck me then, fearfully, that only that coincidence of his name and the Golem's had saved my soul from being enveloped in the creation of clay....

Either one of us might have been captured — him or me. Bauer? What about Bauer? No, he had already been rendered *hors de combat*. And Gloria Cameron was female.

Appledorn mumbled.

He staggered.

Aided by her, he sat down in an armchair.

He stared at me, out of grief-stricken, time-chasmed eyes.

His voice croaked.

"I had to patrol... for years, night after night.... And day after day I stood . . . motionless ... in a back room of the Synagogue. I couldn't. . . . utter a word. I was only... an animated *thing*." He forced out all the words which had long been frozen. At first they emerged like nuggets of ice, then, as his voice thawed, in a gushing stream.

The cobbled alleys, the twisting streets so narrow that the eaves of houses almost touched. . . . Carved painted signs showing a swan, a lute, a crayfish, a giant key, as though each house was a member of some strange zodiac. Here was the building housing the first Hebrew printing press in Central Europe. There were the public baths. Here, a poorhouse; there, an infirmary. All crammed together. In a maze of alleyways. Which he must pace nightly, always keeping out of sight if he could, never speaking, for the *shem* was in his mouth.

And he was successful in his guardianship.

For presently a magnificent Jewish town hall was built. And the High Synagogue; and Klaus Synagogue; and Maisl Synagogue.

So successful was he that further services on his part seemed unnecessary. Frankly, his existence was an embarrassment. Consequently he was walled up, stored in darkness. Forgotten ...

... till of a sudden he found himself standing in a crowded, noisome hut. Bullets tore his emaciated body — in vain, except that through the holes they made they let a breeze into him. He sucked that breeze together, and at last he gasped.

And the grey-clad officer pulled the *shem* from his mouth.

"The book could bring . . . power. So I heard," Appledorn confessed. He needed little prompting now. "Yes, I did hear it from an immigrant who had been in Herzwalde. But the book was still incomplete....

"It's the only *actual* magic book I ever heard of. Books of spells and grimoires: they're just . . . weird words on paper. Nothing effective. This book was magic in itself! And that was because..." He frowned, trying to grasp the reason.

"Because God was absent from Herzwalde," I explained. "So therefore there was a chasm in creation. A gap. The rules did not exist any more — they broke down. The gap could be otherwise filled. I'm the son of Gottfried von Turm, the deputy commandant," I told him. "That is *my* book."

Though I had failed to commune fully with my father, I knew at last what his motive had been.

It had been different from what I had imagined from my mother's memories — ah, Bella's *deluded* recollections!

No wonder Gottfried had been taciturn.

Although on the one hand the SS constituted a veritable bloody occult brotherhood, on the other hand the Nazis cracked down on most independent occultists and occult groups who might in any way form a kernel of opposition to the Nazi regime. They suppressed these potential rivals. The Gestapo drew up lists of organizations little and large, even daffy ones, whose members must not be allowed any government employment, even as a postman. And this made perfect sense; for if the SS were occultly inclined, they must be the sole practitioners of dark and bloody rituals.

Gottfried von Turm had been an occultist of a different stripe, a solitary practitioner in a lonely tower, as it were. Yet he was also an aristocrat. Hence the Gestapo both punished him, and at the same time permitted him a National Socialistic redemption, by forcing his entry into the Waffen-SS.

Along with whom he fought, until he came to Herzwalde. In the camp he discovered a pressure cooker of horrors — a perfect crucible for an experiment. On the surface his project might seem more "benign" in its effects than the loathsome and lunatic medical mutilations which SS doctors performed upon prisoners. Yet it was a deep, dark investigation — by someone who bore Jews no particular animosity whatever, who might even arguably be aiding some of them. As intense heat and pressure might crush carbon into diamond, so might the spiritually humiliating toil of kabalistic rabbis in the Scripture Block, writing in their own blood — in an atmosphere of ultimate despair, devoid of God — create a magical device.

Ah, that *amalgamation* of Jewish blood and holy Christian words culminating in an Apocalypse!

What role did my mother fulfil in this? Oh yes, I *was* to be born — of a Jewess whose people were scribing the book, and of Gottfried's seed! This was the part of himself which Gottfried donated to the project. Most certainly I was to be born, a homunculus of him, a repository of his power—of that power which his project was distilling.

No wonder Gottfried was so silent in bed, so devoid of pillow talk. He was *concentrating*. No wonder he needed to remain detached from me, shunning my birth and my early infancy. For the project was not yet complete. The book wasn't finished.

And then that idiotic bomb killed him; and the book remained unfinished.

Now I understood why I could dream my mother's memories. And why I had felt so impelled to seek out the book.

"Do you think," I demanded of Appledorn, "that if anyone except me had fired a bullet into that book, the rift in reality would have opened up?"

Appledorn was trembling. Gloria Cameron regarded me . . . almost greedily, as if desirous.

"But," Appledorn managed to say. "But the Golem was a legend...."

Yes, it was. In our own history it was a legend.

"There's another domain, Mr Appledorn," I said, with increasing confidence. "The domain of the Sphinx and the Angel, of the Harpy and the Clown." I had never uttered their names aloud before — names which indeed *I myself* had assigned to these entities. Nonetheless, those were the true names.

Appledorn wiped his lips.

"Take the book," he said. "I daren't own it."

"*Aitch Jay!*" protested the woman.

As though it was up to either of them to decide!

The American shook his head numbly. "I couldn't . . . The serving, the standing in darkness for years... I'd rather die than risk . . . something similar."

"Then you will die," the Cameron woman said to him bitterly. She wasn't threatening him, simply uttering a statement of plain fact. "In three or four years, ten years if you're lucky. You'll die, Henry Joseph."

"And therefore so will you one day, Gloria," he replied softly.

It was time for me to leave. High time.

I made both of them lie down upon the floor. Appledorn complied willingly; Gloria Cameron, less so.

I injected her, then him. Then I shut the Blood Bible, and tied the red ribbons.

The steel emblem embedded in the cover was a large mirror-image swastika, made of steel and inset with strips of mirror.

Lille is a fine enough city to hide in, though my stay will be relatively brief. I rent a little top floor apartment in the old town in the Rue de la Clef. David Abramowicz is no more. Now I'm Daniel Kahn, an author determined to finish a book. "About what, Monsieur?" "Why, about cathedrals." There's one substantial example just up the road. I make sure to visit the cathedral occasionally, to stretch my legs.

I take the blood from high up my arms so as not to produce obvious tracks which might attract the attention of antidrugs *flics*.

I arrived in this city with my book at the most opportune time in September — at the start of the vast rummage fair, the Braderie. By ancient charter the whole city centre is given over to thousands of stalls, street upon street of stalls selling old clothes, bric-a-brac, antiques, African carvings, tools, the rubbish from Granny's attic, carpets, curios, anything and everything. I even found a stall selling the extra parchment which I needed. In the evening, while music spewed forth and the whores patrolled, *tout le monde* feasted on mussels cooked in red wine and in cream at a multitude of tables which were further blocking pavements and streets outside of every cafe. Black mountains of empty shells arose. If a car intruded impatiently, tipsy diners tossed mussel shells at it in pique.

Half of the population of Flanders seemed to have descended upon Lille; and tourists galore. What more anonymous time to take up residence, and remain as if enchanted by the city?

My arms ache, and the fingers of my right hand are numb with forming the Gothic letters correctly. I must flex my fingers frequently. There's a whiff of blood in the room, and of sterilising alcohol too, since I wouldn't wish to become septic.

Presently I will reach those final words: *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.*

Amen. Amen. Amen.

So be it! Thus is it in truth!

Then I must bind the book; and having bound it, I shall fire my gun into that book once more, and the bloodstained parchment will split open to reveal the true territory of the Clown and the Harpy, the Angel and the Sphinx; and I shall discover what those beings are.

I myself, and my father within me.

Q

TENEMENT

Mama is out,
And Daddy's long gone.
The room is empty ...
But the cradle rocks anyway.
Shadows strain
Against the walls,
Striving for a lullaby.
Baby smiles ...
Reluctantly.
Already it has learned
To take what it can get.

—Kathleen Youmans